This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

The HISTORY of AYTHAN WARING

VIOLET JACOB

23669.14.140

Harvard College Library

FROM THE BOOKS
IN THE HOMESTEAD OF

Sarah Orne Jewett

AT SOUTH BERWICK, MAINE

BEQUEATHED BY

Theodore Jewett Eastman

A.B. 1901 - M.D. 1905

1931

Digitized by Google

S. O. 1.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

THE HISTORY OF AYTHAN WARING

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

THE HISTORY OF
AYTHAN WARING

BY

VIOLET JACOB

(MRS. ARTHUR JACOB)

NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

31 WEST TWENTY-THIRD STREET

1908

Digitized by Google

23667.14.140

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY
THE BEQUEST OF
THEODORE JEWETT EASTMAN
1931

COPYRIGHT, 1908
BY
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

Digitized by Google

To A. O. J.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

CONTENTS

PAGE

CHAPTER I

THE ROAD FROM LLANGARTH 1

CHAPTER II

THE BOYS 15

CHAPTER III

HESTER 30

CHAPTER IV

"THE GREEN JINER" 41

CHAPTER V

NINE NOTCHES 56

CHAPTER VI

BARBARA LOOKS FOR A BOOK 70

CHAPTER VII

FROM HEAVEN TO PURGATORY 78

CHAPTER VIII

EUSTACE'S MEDITATIONS 92

CHAPTER IX

RICHARD'S BARN 104

Digitized by Google

PAGE

CHAPTER X

THE MAN WITH THE SHABBY COAT . . . 115

CHAPTER XI

AYTHAN CROSSES THE RUBICON 127

CHAPTER XII

EUSTACE'S FAMILIAR 137

CHAPTER XIII

THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE 151

CHAPTER XIV

THE WAR-PATH 160

CHAPTER XV

THE WAR-PATH (*Continued*) 170

CHAPTER XVI

NEMESIS 183

CHAPTER XVII

THE TOILS 195

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. TROUP'S VISITORS 205

CHAPTER XIX

THE LIGHT IN THE WINDOW 220

CHAPTER XX

HESTER AND HAPPINESS 231

Digitized by Google

PAGE

CHAPTER XXI

THE PORCH 241

CHAPTER XXII

ON GOVERNMENT SERVICE 255

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SILENT PARTNERSHIP 272

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ANGEL 285

CHAPTER XXV

"THE PLACE OF DRAGONS" 299

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LONG DAY 312

CHAPTER XXVII

AGAINST HOPE 328

CHAPTER XXVIII

SIR HELBERT IS RECKLESS 340

CHAPTER XXIX

EUSTACE'S JOURNEY 357

CHAPTER XXX

THE TURN OF THE ROAD 369

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

AYTHAN WARING

CHAPTER I

THE ROAD FROM LLANGARTH

WHERE the highroad is free of Llangarth town and makes westward past the almshouses the bird-haunted hedges sent out a cloud of disturbed occupants. Noisy themselves, the sparrows and chaffinches resented the clamour of boys' voices, which had drawn a couple of old crones to their doors.

The reason of the uproar was invisible, but it was evidently approaching behind the angle that a white washed building made upon the side-path. Female tones, rough and abusive, rose above the sound of cries, footsteps, jeers, and shrill laughter.

Round the corner came the figure of a woman walking in the middle of the road and pursued by a crowd of urchins of varying ages. It had not long stopped raining, and the water splashed under her heavy tread; when, now and again, a venturesome brat came close behind her, she would turn suddenly, making the mud fly as she plunged back into the shouting flock. Had it not been for her basket and bundle, and the shawl that encumbered her arms, her tormentors would have kept a good

Digitized by Google

deal farther in her wake; for "Mad Moll" was of a strength and stature uncommon to womanhood, and the hands that grasped her load were knotted like those of a man, while her square shoulders made her height seem even greater than it was. But, in spite of her commanding appearance, a certain vacillation of gait, an unconcentrated look, betrayed a fault in her mental balance which, though slight, was great enough to put her at the mercy of inferior creatures. She was well on the hither side of even early middle age, but exposure and the rough life of field-work had hardened the lines and tanned the skin of her face, coarsening her features till they looked almost masculine; her eyes were brown and piercing, unmarred by the cunning light that sits so often in the eyes of her kind; they were merely wild, like those of a night-bird confronted with daylight. The only real grotesqueness about the woman was her be-ribboned hat, made of battered Tuscan straw, which stood out in front with the prevailing "poke" shape of the day. It was so ornate and so unlike the rest of her clothing, both in form and spirit, that a stranger might have guessed it the primary cause of the tumult; but he would have been wrong, for it was as well known to Llangarth as the church tower above the Wye. It threw a shadow on the wearer's eyes, which heightened the strangeness of the face below it.

A gig came rolling out of the town, carrying a farmer and his wife; the man shouted to Moll to get out of the way as he passed, and the smart trot of the white-stockinged horse scattered the boys. He made a playful flick at her with his whip. She stood back humbly, glancing at the piece of

Digitized by Google

high-coloured femininity in the gig with a sort of admiring awe.

"She 've got a better 'at nor you!" cried a boy, who had come near enough to pluck at the end of her shawl. Her brows lowered and she turned quickly, dropping her basket, and gripped him like a vice. She shook him to and fro and threw him from her.

As he ran back among his fellows they raised a shout, and one of three big boys—lads of eighteen, or thereabouts—who were following on the outskirts of the party, picked up a stone. "'Ere 's for you!" he cried, as he was about to raise his arm.

At the same moment a cuff on the side of his head, dealt by an open hand, sent him staggering half across the road. Two young men had come up behind the little mob and were standing close by; the shorter of the two was rubbing his palm on his coat and looking threateningly at the boy who had just felt its weight.

"I 'll teach you, you blackguards!" he was saying, as his eyes went from one to another of the three.

"Be off with you!" exclaimed his companion, waving his walking-stick at the smaller fry, who were beginning to retreat in some haste—"disgraceful little animals! Tell your mothers from me to whip you all. I hope they have not annoyed you very much," he added, turning to the woman; "I am really sorry we did not come up sooner."

She stared at him, silent.

"Your bonnet is not injured, I am thankful to say," he went on; "they could not reach it, you see.

Digitized by Google

That is a good thing, I am sure—is n't it, Aythan?"

But Aythan's mind was on other things; the youth he had struck was sidling up to him, and the two others had crossed the road and were getting round behind his back.

"Do you want to fight?" said he. "I can't manage three, but I 'll take two of you at a time, if you like. Eustace, you can see fair play."

"Nonsense," said Eustace, coming towards him; "my good fellow, you can't fight in the road. It 's market day. What we want is the constable."

But these words had no chance of making their intended effect. Aythan's victim, whose ear was still ringing, was of the same mind as his friends; while it would be safe for three to attack one, it might prove a less profitable business when there were two. They did not stop to consider the alternative, and soon Eustace Waring and his cousin were left standing with Moll in the empty highway. She had taken off her bonnet and uncovered a mass of heavy hair. She examined the bedizened thing carefully, seeming to have no interest in what was going on.

"It is not touched, I assure you," said Eustace again. "Come, put it on, and you will look as handsome as ever. We are all going the same way, and my cousin and I will walk with you until you are out of sight of the town. See, here is your basket."

He handed it to her; there was a touch of fantastic exaggeration in the act.

The side-path was narrow, and Aythan dropped behind, looking compassionately as he went at the figure which strode before him, taller than the man

Digitized by Google

beside it, a good deal taller than himself. Its proportions made Eustace's light slimness seem lighter and slimmer, and his easy walk more graceful; and Aythan, though not inclined to go much into details with his thoughts, realised, half consciously, how adroitly his cousin seemed to fall into his place under every circumstance. Whatever he did was dexterous; and dexterity was a talent the younger man had admired in him during the greater part of the eighteen years which, allowing for school and college, they had lived together. He had felt himself to be lacking in it very often.

Twenty-five is not usually a modest age; for, though the years that precede it are the ones that pass most slowly, life has scarcely had time to lay its heavy but wholesome hand upon us; it is only later we learn—if we are lucky enough to learn it at all—that, though the world is an apple which hangs on everybody's tree, he who would eat it must first have had his teeth shrewdly ground.

But, all the same, Aythan was modest, and it is possible that contact with his cousin had helped to make him so. Men were younger at five-and-twenty in those more provincial days in the first half of the nineteenth century than they are now, so it was the more to his credit that he had lit, thus soon, upon what should be a full-grown attribute.

Though they were the sons of brothers, there was so little likeness between the two young men that no one would have supposed them to be related; nor had they any of those tricks of manner and speech common, so often, to persons of the same blood. Their unlikeness was heightened by the moustache

Digitized by Google

which Eustace had chosen to wear, in defiance of the clean-shaved fashion of his time, and which, in its slight upward curve at the corners, emphasised the alert expression of his personality. When he smiled the lines of his face seemed to follow its direction, and he had that greatest of all charms, a pair of eyes in which the smile could be read before it touched his lips. He was pale under the healthy tan which the spring sun had laid evenly from the fold of his stock to the brown hair on his forehead, and though, once, a woman had described his appearance as "effeminate," the man she addressed replied vaguely, wondering afresh at the time-honoured faculty of her sex for mistaking bulk for power. It was seldom, however, that women to whom Eustace Waring had spoken were critical; and the one in question was in her eighty-first year.

There was something of exultation in Moll's face; indignities of many sorts were not new to her, and it was not often that they ended so well. The pale between the world and herself, the existence of which she realised without understanding it, seemed less high while so fine a person as Mr. Waring from Crishowell House walked beside her. He had noticed her bonnet, too. The hovel she inhabited with a sister was a couple of miles farther up the road, and she hoped that Betsy would be looking out as she reached it; she would be surprised when she saw who was with her. She took little heed of Aythan.

Her dumbness began to wear off in the pleasant sense of the glory of her position. "Law, indeed! but you be a grand gentleman," she exclaimed simply.

Digitized by Google

Eustace laughed.

"Not half as grand as you are when you have that bonnet on," he replied, with a glance at Aythan, who had come alongside as the way widened.

"I do wear it o' market days only. Her be too good for common. Farmer Price's lady, when her give it me, her said, 'You 'll get no better in London,' her said—and I 've got more ribbons on it since that."

"It is quite fine enough for London," said Eustace gravely; "everybody would be looking at you there, Moll."

"Well, to be sure!" she exclaimed, delighted.

Aythan walked along, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the ground. He was whistling between his teeth.

"We can turn off here and go up the fields," he said, pointing to a gap in the budding hedge, beyond which the green slopes ran upwards.

"No, no," said his cousin; "I am sure Moll needs escort yet. We 'll go up by the blacksmith's shop. Aythan, you have no manners. I promise you that 's true, Moll; it is my cousin's only fault. I am sure you can see that by merely looking at him."

Moll was bewildered; it was hard enough to her to understand many things simpler than banter. But it only dazzled her the more.

"Well, he bean't like you, o' course," she said, looking puzzled.

Eustace laughed again, throwing back his head.

"Then you bean't comin' no farther nor blacksmith's?" inquired she. "I be main sorry Betsy won't see me walking like a lady."

"Oh, you must give my compliments to Betsy,"

Digitized by Google

he replied lightly. "Aythan, you will send yours, too, I know."

His cousin made no answer, but cut with the ash-plant he carried at the young grass by the road-side. He missed Eustace's legs narrowly.

They walked on in silence.

The enervating softness of spring was on the country, closing about it like the grasp of a warm hand. The rain had rolled off from the high, pale sky, and every root and bud under its arch shed its separate scent on the air. Accustomed to the flat barrenness of plough-land and naked trees of the winter months, the eye was almost oppressed by such a sudden burst of detail as the last week had brought forth. Wisps of white blackthorn stood, plumelike, in the greenness of the hedges that ran uniformly on either side of the way, brilliant at close quarters, cloudy in the distance. The little runnels at their base, narrow and half-hidden, made a trickling accompaniment to the medley of lambs' voices, bird-songs, and the expostulatory tones of rooks; the world was as though crowded to faintness with sight and sound. A small collection of cottages which they passed had the air of being absorbed into the general softness; instead of standing, clear-cut, from their surroundings, they were beginning to have their outlines blurred by the encroachment of vegetation. The moist earth in their garden-strips showed, here and there, the star of a primrose; tufts of polyanthus, robust and innocent, threw odd bits of brown or rose-colour into the prevailing web of gray and green woven by spring's hand. There was a whiff of wallflower. A child was crawling solemnly over one of the thresh-

Digitized by Google

olds, and, as they went by, it dragged itself to its feet with the help of the jamb, standing round-eyed, thumb in mouth, to watch the passers.

Eustace waved his hand to it. "Hullo, baby!" he cried.

The infant made no sign, resolving itself into a pure lump of astonishment.

"They be main good in there," observed Moll; "I 've had many a bite I were glad of, goin' by in the cold mornin's."

Another hundred yards brought them to the blacksmith's shop, at which place a lane ran upwards towards Crishowell House.

"Good-bye, Moll," said Eustace, as he and Aythan turned off; "you can tell Betsy we have taken care of you."

She stood watching them as they ascended the road, side by side, and, when a bend of the way hid them, she jerked her basket to a more comfortable balance and trudged forward.

In front of the blacksmith's shop, at the parting of their paths, stood a shabby house whose upper windows were darkened by the boughs of an immense wych-elm. The bole of this tree, planted, practically, in the road, was so much scarred by the wheels of unwary drivers that a shrewd man might guess, without looking at the building behind it, that he was standing in front of a public house. A stone slab protruded above the door by way of a porch, and the depression, now almost dignified into a gutter, which made a kind of pitfall in the flags of the threshold, bore silent but sure witness to its popularity; there was something so squalidly and yet genially human in the look of the place that one

Digitized by Google

might, with some propriety, describe the sign flattened against the wall under the eaves as being nailed just above its right eyebrow.

As it had not the dignity of looking on the king's highway—for the coach road to Brecon had diverged half a mile out of Llangarth—it displayed no exalted device; no attenuated and bellicose lion struggled, torn between passion and majesty, on its board; no royal duke eyed the toss-pots and travellers over his laced coat; but a mild white cow had stood on her blue background while four generations had emptied their mugs and filled their graves. The inn was known to the neighbourhood, shortly, as "The Cow."

Behind it, beyond the boundary of its small orchard, the green fields grew steep, and, against the wooded hillside above them, the yellowing, roughcast face of Crishowell House could be seen, a good landmark for that part of the Wye valley. The front windows looked westward to the Brecon Hills, staring over the falling ground at the foot of which Crishowell village lay snug upon the Digedi brook; and up the narrow valley formed by the waters' northward course from height to river stretched the long shoulder of the Black Mountain, looming over and dominating the country; a presence sinister and still, brooding changeless, like a foreboding in a troubled heart. In heavy winter days, when the sky hung low, it was a wall shutting the valley's mouth; in summer, in long evenings, the play of light on the upland plateaus, where sheep grazed in the last smile of the sun, made its form seem as though receding into unending translucence; at night, when the stars stood over its

Digitized by Google

summit, it was a phantom on the borderland of eternity.

As the two men breasted the rise of the lane the mountain came up before them in the spring blueness, soft with recent moisture, the hill farms in the upper part of Crishowell parish catching the level sunshine on the slopes; and the three Scotch firs which grew by the near end of the house threw the landscape farther back by their mellow darkness.

"Poor devil!" exclaimed Eustace, looking down towards the road; "women are all the same, whether they have any wits or not. She would do anything for me now—not because I rid her of those brats, but because I made much of the ridiculous thing on her head. Don't look sulky, Aythan. Why should I not be civil?"

"You were not civil," said Aythan shortly. "You were damned rude."

The other made no denial, but looked at his companion as though suddenly interested; of late years it had struck him that his perceptions, such as they were, cropped up in odd places. As a boy, he had credited him with very few, but he had grown to believe himself mistaken; and the absence of desire to ignore any of his own mistakes was one of Eustace's really great qualities. He never glozed them over, for he had that true economy which will, so to speak, collect the wreckage of its accidents and make danger-boards of the broken wood.

When on a level with Crishowell House the ground grew flat, though to their left it ran up abruptly through an orchard to the wood behind it. Beyond the maze of apple-stems, knotted roots of

Digitized by Google

ancient trees could be seen, and scars of brown earth where winter rains had loosened the soil; in a few weeks the branches would break into a wealth of bloom. Aythan turned aside up the bank and jumped through a gap in the wattle into the orchard; they were whitewashing the trunks before the grub season should begin, and he wanted to see how the work was getting forward. Eustace went on alone.

When he had satisfied himself he strolled on upwards till he emerged from the labyrinth of apple-trees on to the rugged ground above. Its clay clung to his boots, and he kicked it off as he sat down on a stump, the naked roots of which hung sprawling where the earth had fallen away. From his elevation he could look over the valley and see, beyond the thin smoke of the village, the silver ribbon of the curling Wye. A harsh-voiced jay flew out from the woody patch behind him and sailed across space to the knoll on the opposite side of the Digedi, half a mile off. It made him feel almost giddy to see, from the bird's own level, the empty depth of air beneath its outspread wings. He sat watching its flight until it dropped, lost to the eye, against the distant timber. How he loved the place! He knew every ditch and rabbit-hole and thicket as if he had made them; he had nested, shot, scrambled, and ridden over every inch of the country below his feet. He had ploughed, in winter, through the heavy snow drifting deep before the north wind that hurled its gusts at the rampart of the mountain, he had bathed in summer in the still pool of the brook whose exact whereabouts he could point out at this moment, though he could not see it, and only knew its position from the lie of its surroundings.

Digitized by Google

His brow cleared as he sat surveying the things he loved; Eustace had said that he looked sulky, and, as his face was of a type sometimes called "sullen" by those who mistake form for expression, he had spoken with some truth. He had been annoyed, too; his cousin's remark, that women were all alike whether they had wits or not, might or might not be correct, but, though he did not care much for women's society, he had an instinctive feeling that, mad or sane, they should be treated alike in courtesy. Sometimes his admiration for Eustace stopped at his appearance.

As regards his own, it was a matter to which he gave little thought, in spite of the rather exaggerated sense of his physical inferiority to his cousin, which pricked him when he suspected that Eustace remembered it. He had not the striking, natural elegance which distinguished the other; he was squarely built and of middle height, with a deep chest and strong hands. But there were two remarkable things about him; one was the fact that his eyebrows were so many shades darker than his hair, and the other that but one person in the world had ever disliked him. And it was only when his straight, blunt features were in repose that the most careless observer could connect anything in his looks with such a word as "sullen." He had steady eyes and a voice that came from the depth of his large lungs, strong and very soft. Even Eustace recognised its charm, though his unfailing impudence forced its way through his appreciation. "No woman will ever resist your voice, Aythan," he had once said, "till she sees your face. Then you may have some trouble." And Aythan had laughed,

Digitized by Google

for the vagaries of Eustace's tongue pleased him immensely, and he had neither self-consciousness nor vanity.

He rose and went yet higher up the slope. It was nearly four o'clock, and the sun stood over the farther shoulder of the mountain. Well as he and his cousin generally got on, he had had enough of him for that day, and there was a man he wanted to see at one of the hill farms; for the Crishowell House property extended some way southward, and, in the couple of years since he had left college, he had done most of its management. He started for the place; like many who care little for talking, he loved walking alone.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER II

THE BOYS

THE chance which connected Aythan with Crishowell had had its origin long years before, when Matthew Bridges, the owner of the place, had crossed the path of Margaret Tryon. Matthew was one who did most things deliberately, but, in spite of his own character and his thirty-two years, he fell as suddenly and as headlong in love as though he had been a boy. It was not much to be wondered at, for Margaret was extremely attractive, and when she refused him he made up his solid mind to give her a decent interval in which to change hers and then to propose again. The worst of it was that, by the end of the time, she had engaged herself to another man; and that this person should be his own nearest living relation and possible heir did not lessen the irony of the matter.

Captain Aythan Waring was so distant a relation that Matthew only knew him by name as a cavalry officer whose requirements were formed on a different scale to his income. There was nothing for it but to repair his damaged heart as best he could and try to think about something else. Had he made the same attempt while under torture his success might have been as great.

Digitized by Google

In due time news reached him of the birth of a son, and Margaret, with a certain lack of humour, invited him to be godfather. It was not the position he had proposed to occupy towards her child, but Matthew accepted it as he had accepted her refusal, manfully. The next tidings that came to him were of the death of Margaret herself. Neither his romance nor that of the improvident officer had been long-lived.

It was three years before any communication passed between the two men; but at the beginning of the Peninsular War a letter came to Crishowell announcing that the writer's regiment was likely to go to the front. Matthew's successful rival wrote reminding him of his godfatherhood, and begging his unknown cousin to befriend little Aythan should it happen that he did not return. As Bridges sat with the soldier's letter before him he realised who the man that should one day step into his shoes would possibly—probably be; not the man he had tried, so far successfully, to avoid (for though he bore Waring no grudge he had never had any desire to meet him), but Margaret's son. He replied at once, kindly, if a little formally. Captain Waring was to have no anxiety. Should he fall in his country's service the boy was to be placed immediately under his own care. He would bring him up as his son, and, though his estate was unentailed and he had the right to leave it to whom he would, as his successor. By the time the words reached their destination Captain Waring was past all worldly considerations.

And thus it fell that, some weeks after the news of his father's hasty burial at Corunna, the five-

Digitized by Google

year-old Aythan entered into what was to be, eventually, his kingdom.

Matthew's pleasure in the child's company was boundless. Every year that had elapsed since his disappointment had left him slipping more deeply into a dull monotony of mind. He was not sociable, nor had he the veriest screw of an intellectual hobby-horse to amble with him into fresh ground. The sturdy little boy, who chased the poultry and played his solitary games in orchard and garden, supplied the human interest for which he was unconsciously craving. From henceforth Aythan was the pivot on which his day moved. Being by nature extremely unexacting and acutely conscious of the years dividing him from his godson he was the more gratified to find his affection returned without stint.

For some time nothing came to alter the tenor of the two oddly-assorted lives, till, one day, there happened one of those simple things which often turn the current of an existence. Bridges was driving homewards in his high gig with Aythan beside him, the little boy holding the end of the reins and waving a switch that his godfather had cut for him from the hedge. It was a dusty day, and, as they passed a village pond, Matthew pulled up to let the old mare between the shafts have a mouthful of water. Close by some lads from the nearest cottages were playing "touch wood," chasing one another from tree to tree.

Aythan dropped his switch, entranced; the charming fact that a part of either wheel was actually submerged and Sally's white nose making awful gurglings while she sucked down the draught was forgotten as he strained, with parted lips and eager

Digitized by Google

eyes, to watch the game. Here was a phase of life he had never suspected. As one of the boys made a capture his delighted laugh rang out and he jumped about on the cushions, clapping his hands. There was something in the unconscious isolation of the little fellow beside him which struck Matthew to the heart; and the sharp note of wonder in his cry had, for his ears, an almost unendurable pathos; he could not bear to see how, as they pulled out of the water and drove on, he looked back, and back again, at the fascinating sight. The result was, a couple of months later, the arrival of Eustace at Crishowell.

Matthew's philosophy of life admitted of no beating about bushes; having once realised the loneliness of Aythan's childhood, he cast about for its remedy. There were no boys of suitable age belonging to his neighbours, and, even had he happened upon one, he understood, with a shrewdness sharpened by love, that, to a child, an intermittent companionship can never be the same as the bond existing between the sharers of good and evil hours alike. At last the solution dawned upon him. He was slightly acquainted with a younger brother of Aythan's father, a man who had taken orders on the strength of a promised living, married young, and spent his time since that event in watching, with horrified eyes, the headlong increase of his family. Matthew's proposal, almost brutal in its straightforwardness, of taking one of his sons to educate with his cousin, fell upon him like a beneficent thunderbolt. The offer was princely; the struggling parents felt that it would be a tempting of Providence to refuse. Eustace, as their eldest

Digitized by Google

boy was called, was to take up his abode under Mr. Bridges's roof, there to remain until Aythan should be old enough to go to school, where the two were to proceed together. All the expenses of clothing and education were to be paid, and once a year the lad was to spend a month at his own home; eventually a commission was to be bought for him in the army with his necessary outfit. The parson drew a long breath as he listened and wondered what the figures of his kinsman's income could possibly be.

Matthew was quite pleased with the glimpse he had of the youngster; his face had so much intelligence; his manners, too, were better than those he had thought to find among the rabble of children filling a house where every one seemed to live from hand to mouth. He gave him half a crown as he left, promising to tell young Aythan at home that he had found him a fine playfellow.

"You shall have a warm welcome, boy," he said kindly, as he got into his chaise.

Eustace stood smiling as the carriage door shut and the postilion raised his bridle hand; his prospects pleased him vastly. A servant was to be sent for him in a fortnight. He ran up the garden where the hollyhocks were out near the wall; behind it, the greyhounds which were the Rev. Charles Waring's only remaining link with the sporting life he had loved, barked at the retreating sound of wheels. Inside the house their owner was encouraging his wife, whose tears dropped upon the bald head of the baby she carried, while she watched her son skipping back with the bright coin in his hand.

Digitized by Google

"You must cheer up, Louisa, my love," he was saying. "Our little Eustace will be quite happy."

"Oh yes; I have no doubt of that," replied Louisa, rather drearily.

Aythan counted the days till the expected playmate should arrive; before his godfather told him of the impending change he had never consciously felt the want of a companion, being contented with his solitary amusements and the occasional joy of an outing with Matthew. But, now that Eustace was imminent, he could think of nothing else. When the great day came and the rumble of wheels was heard at the turning by "The White Cow" he was beside the horse-block at the garden gate, listening. Matthew lifted him upon it and the two watched the roof of the approaching carriage as it loomed between the hedges, mounting the hill. Being suddenly taken with shyness, he remained dumb upon his eminence as the horses drew up.

Eustace sprang out and was replying very civilly to Bridges's greeting almost before the step was let down. Interest had made Aythan immovable.

"Here, come down, child!" exclaimed Matthew; "this is your cousin."

Aythan obeyed, flushing, and held out his hand; his eyes were fixed upon Eustace's pale face and waving hair, ruffled by the cap he had just pulled off. To him, as to his godfather, he appeared charming.

When the newcomer was handed over to the housekeeper the old woman took him up-stairs to show him where he was to sleep. Like all servants long in one family, she reflected the temper of its moving spirit. "See," she said, "you must not feel

Digitized by Google

strange without your brothers and sisters. I have put your bed in Master Aythan's room."

Eustace smiled all over his face; he did not look as though he would feel strange anywhere.

"I like this place," he remarked to his cousin as the two boys stood in the garden before bedtime. Above their heads one of the three Scotch firs forked and sent a ragged limb sprawling out horizontally. The place was Aythan's favourite corner, for a rope-swing dangled from the bough.

"Get into it," he said, anxious that his friend should taste every procurable delight.

"Look!" cried Eustace. And, in another moment, he had swarmed up the rope and was astride of the bough. Then he turned over, hanging by his arms, and dropped on the grass; and Aythan accepted him from that hour.

At last the time came when the clergyman who arrived twice a week on his primitive pony, from his still more primitive parish in the mountain, was dismissed, and the boys sent to school. The three years separating them seemed rather to diminish as time passed, for companionship wrought much for Aythan. Eustace was still something of a marvel to him, but now less so physically than mentally, for, in their occasional encounters, he would go perilously near to being the better man. As college succeeded school for the elder lad, the younger saw little of him during the time which elapsed before he followed; and it was when both were absent that there happened a thing foreseen by neither. Matthew Bridges suddenly left the last shred of youth behind him; for we step across the first boundary of age the day we realise that life can be remade.

Digitized by Google

He, the acceptedly inconsolable, the man of habit, fell in love, and in this second venture of the heart was successful. He wrote to both the young men, telling them of his fortunate condition and adding that he hoped, within two months from the date on his letter, to be the husband of Miss Hester Corbett. Aythan, who had kept his supremacy in his godfather's affections into manhood, received his full confidence.

"You know, my dear boy," concluded Matthew, "that though this change will probably affect your prospects, my affection for you cannot alter. You have been my son and the best son a man ever had, and such you will remain. If it is to be that a child of mine succeeds to this place your future will be assured by me in any profession you may select, with as large an allowance as I can make you. I have lived so frugally that I find myself better off than I was when you first came to Crishowell, so there will be enough to enable you to do as you please. But I am bound to say that I look forward with pain to anything that may part us, and for that reason I suggest that, when you leave college, you should help me with the work of this estate, for which I will pay you the same sum that I should pay to an agent until you wish to take up any other way of life. Then I will give you sufficient to begin upon, and, in any case, my will secures you an adequate allowance. Think of this, my dear Aythan, and let me hear, as soon as you can, of your decision, for the only drawback to my happiness is the thought that you may take the matter to heart, or may, by this change, be minded to leave Crishowell. I only pray this will not be. My marriage,

Digitized by Google

of course, makes no difference to Eustace, and our arrangement stands the same; namely, that my house is his home until your education is over and you have had a year or two here together before his commission is bought. I am not anxious to part with either of you and our life will, I hope, go on much as it has done for the next few years, but with the addition of a lady for whom I know you will have nothing but esteem. I have told her all I am now writing to you and she bids me inform you of her anxiety to take a mother's place towards you, as I have tried to take that of a father. . . ."

Then followed some description of Miss Corbett's qualities and appearance, which, as the rest of this story is likely to set them forth, we may omit.

A few days later Aythan wrote wishing him all joy and accepting his offer. It is probable he would have done so in any case; but, be that as it may, he knew the story of his godfather's life, and the idea that Matthew's tardy cup of happiness should contain one black drop which he could remove touched a generous spirit whose loyalty leaped eagerly to the occasion.

The lady whose maternal feeling was so tastefully stirred was hardly suited—in years, at least—to be Aythan's mother, for she was just turned of thirty and looked younger. But the opinion of those days saddled all unmarried women of more than eight-and-twenty with the epithet of "old maid," and it was thought a suitable thing that the man of her choice had reached the sober age of fifty-seven. To quote her family: "Hester was a woman who knew what she was doing." They prepared to attend the wedding in flocks.

Digitized by Google

"This is the result of our both being away," said Eustace. "He would never have left Crishowell if we had been at home. We might have known when he went to London that he was after no good. It 's hard on you, Aythan."

"I don't see that," replied the other.

"Oh, if you have no objection, I have none. As he says, it will not affect me."

"If he did not think it unsuitable, I should like to be his best man," observed Aythan, after a pause.

"It would be more appropriate if you gave him away," rejoined Eustace.

The young men had, certainly, nothing to complain of in Mrs. Bridges's welcome when the vacation began. She was delighted with Eustace, and if, as time passed, the preference grew more marked, the few friends who came to Crishowell were, no doubt, right in their guesses at its cause; for Matthew's interests, after the first year of married life, had gone back to their old groove and Aythan was, as he had been for so long, his first thought. And there was no child of Hester's to push him from his place. It was as if the marriage had been an episode and Time had given it rank with such things. No sign of outward importance was lacking to Matthew's wife; but for all that she was a cipher—no more—in his mind.

In spite of this their world rolled on well enough. Husband and wife had no fault to find with each other; Hester wore a look of contented prosperity, and all Bridges's desire was to spend his days out of doors with Aythan at his heels. No hedge was trimmed, no covert planted, no horse bought but

Digitized by Google

these two had discussed and settled it as partners. It might almost have been said that the harmonious household was cut into two sections, consisting of Bridges and Aythan and Mrs. Bridges and Eustace; and that the latter, through Aythan, made the connecting link between the two.

Habit had so grown upon Matthew and the wheels of existence ran so smooth that his middle-aged dislike of change forbade him to look far into the future. Aythan was his son and he wanted no other; Hester had, to all appearance, everything she asked of life. Eustace's departure would annoy her, break up their comfort, rob his godson of youthful companionship; besides which, Eustace seemed to have no desire to go. So, at last, all talk of the commission ceased.

When Bridges came within twelve months of his sixty-second birthday he determined to make a new will. He had left the bulk of his personal property and Crishowell House to Hester for life, and after her death to the issue of their marriage, at the same time making provision for Aythan in the shape of a substantial legacy. The fact that he had married in middle age made a long minority for his heir very probable, and he desired above all things that that heir should be brought up upon the place. For this reason he had appointed his wife sole guardian of his children so long as she remained unmarried, and in the event of his own decease without issue, Crishowell House was to be hers for life whether she remained a widow or not. On her death it was to pass with his personalty to Aythan, his godson as well as his nearest living kinsman.

But now that the hoped-for heir seemed to have

Digitized by Google

become an improbability, Matthew's mind took a different turn; he decided to make a fresh will, leaving Crishowell and half his property to Aythan absolutely, and the rest of his fortune to Hester. In this way she would be amply provided for; so amply that, within reasonable limits, her means would allow her any establishment she chose to fancy. In the event of an heir being born he told himself that he could always make another will to suit altered circumstances. The project lay at his heart.

He said nothing of the matter to any one; but before sending the rough draft to his lawyer in Hereford to be embodied in the legal document, he told his wife very simply what he had done and desired her to read it.

"There will be plenty for you, my dear," he said. "You will be in a position, should you and Aythan not wish to keep house together, to rent any place you choose, either in this neighborhood or any other, and to live in the same comfort you have lived in here. The same sum is yours for life, whether you re-marry or whether you do not. You're a young woman and that is, in my eyes, only fair. Eustace's allowance is not great, but it will be enough, and the money for his commission will be in a lump sum for him to use in that way or to start him in any other business. When Stotson writes that this will is ready to be signed I will go at once to Hereford and get it over."

Matthew desired no special secrecy about the matter, though he did not mention it to Aythan, for to speak of it seemed in some vague way to bring their parting nearer; and that parting was the one

Digitized by Google

terror death held for him. There was a certain hardness in Hester's face as she and Eustace talked it over. She was a woman who did not always look the same alone as she did in company. But Eustace did not count as company.

"He still seems to have my commission on his mind," observed the young man.

"I thought he had forgotten that," said Hester.

When Bridges heard that the will was drawn up he set off, the next day, for Hereford; he went on horseback, for he was a hale, strong man, and the twenty-mile ride meant little to him. Before starting he told Hester to tell Aythan of the errand on which he had gone and the arrangement he was making. She watched him from a window as he rode away; he meant to stay the night at "The Green Dragon."

It was about noon when Bridges, who had taken no servant with him but carried his small valise on his saddle, rode across the Wye where it flows by the square tower of Whitney church. Autumn had set in and the green boughs of the trees were tipped with yellow. It was warm and he jogged carelessly along, the reins loose, his eyes on the cool waters below him, when a rabbit came scuttling down a bank at his side pursued by a poaching dog. The beast bounded through a gap into the road not ten yards in front, and his horse swerved round, stumbling as he did so and throwing him heavily forward on a stone-heap. His head struck the heap and he lay still, the trickling blood making a dark stain on the flints. The horse trotted down the hill snorting, his tail arched, then turned and came back to the prostrate man and began quietly to crop the

Digitized by Google

grass on the bank. But Bridges lay where he fell.

An hour later he was carried by some passing labourers to a cottage and a message sent to Crishowell House. There was no doctor nearer than Llangarth; as the two who practised there both proved to be out, Hester and Aythan arrived almost as soon as medical help could be got. He lay in the stupor of concussion; it might be days before consciousness returned, they were told, or it might not return at all. At any rate he must not be moved. Eustace had been left at Crishowell to dispatch anything that might be required, should Hester send for it. She sat bolt upright beside her husband, her lips pressed together, her hands in her lap. She took no notice of her companion.

Matthew died. Just before the end his mind was clear and he recognised his wife. But his last look was at Aythan.

And so, in spite of all the dead man's trouble, death stepped in to decide the matter which had been so dear to him. The new will lay in the lawyer's office, so much waste paper, and Hester's lifetime intervened between Aythan and the place in which Matthew had desired him to stand. If she felt any discomfort in her position she did not show it, and no one who knew Aythan could suppose that a word concerning anything he might feel would pass his lips. He was very lonely in those days, for Hester, who kept her room, claimed nearly all Eustace's attention; in the myriad small decisions that her new responsibility entailed his advice seemed a necessity.

She had asked Aythan to go on with his agent's work; she knew—so it was expressed—that her

Digitized by Google

husband would have wished it, and she, herself, felt that nobody could take his place. Eustace was charged with the delivery of this message. "She does not feel that she can speak to you about it," he said when he had done so; "it is natural enough, Aythan, as things stand. I think it would be cruel of you to desert her. And it is only you who know exactly how he wished things done."

Aythan's eyes suddenly filled. It was not the perplexities of Mrs. Bridges that moved him; it was the memory of a well-known figure standing with him in the fields that floated through Eustace's last words.

"You have so much tact, Eustace," said Hester, when he brought Aythan's satisfactory reply. "I hope you have given up thinking of the army."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER III

HESTER

EUSTACE walked on to the house. The road ended in front of its door, for, having passed the farm-gate beyond the mansion, it became a mere field-track winding towards the mountain.

Crishowell House was by no means a large place; standing as it did in the teeth of the western gales it was marked by weather in the same way that a human being is marked by the wear of life. The entrance fronted on the lane, on the farther side of which the ground rose so abruptly that the carved wood gables of the windows above the door looked straight into the rocky bank set with tree-roots. The house, built by a royalist squire who had suffered for concealing adherents of Charles I., had been given by Cromwell to the Matthew Bridges of his day as a reward for having fought three times beside the Protector; and this man had transmitted his name through the centuries to Aythan's god-father. It was said that the long barn huddled against the bank—an eyesore to Hester, as it thrust its unabashed utilitarianism in her face every time she crossed the threshold—was the old banqueting hall; above the hay and straw, piled almost to the

Digitized by Google

rafters, its ornate cornice proclaimed that it had been made for grander uses than the storing of litter. Hester had once spoken of pulling it down, but Aythan's face and the unexpected sympathy Eustace gave to his horror had kept her from doing more. The boys had rolled each other about among the straw inside it years before she had heard the name of Bridges.

On the western side, Crishowell House was plain and square, catching the red lights of sunset on its windows, and seeming higher than it was by reason of the ground, which fell away down the garden to the fields. It was homely, though it suggested history; intimate, yet incongruous; perhaps from its position, perhaps because of the mountain a couple of miles away, there hung round it something that, in a human being, would be called detachment. It was as though that great presence had reached across the space and laid its shadow upon its walls.

Eustace went down the narrow passage beyond the oak door; it led straight through the house to the drawing-room in which Hester sat. As he entered the afternoon sun was warming the garden beyond the panes, nevertheless, the room, like most rooms in the house, looked dark. The windows, set in their wooden panelling, were not wide, and the ceiling, tinted a dull mauve and decorated in plaster with a garlanded thyrsus, seemed near enough to be oppressive.

Hester sat by a little mahogany table, sewing; she did not look up, though she knew very well who had come in; yards of white lawn stock lay on the table beside her open workbox, and her thick, white

Digitized by Google

fingers whisked the thread in and out with the measured regularity of a shuttle as she hemmed the frayed end of the folds.

He sat down on the window-seat and began playing with the tassel of the blind.

"Aythan ought to be obliged to you," he said at last, rather mischievously.

"Does Aythan wear such fine stocks as these?" she asked, without lifting her eyes.

He gave the tassel a twirl that sent its fringes flying out like the skirts of a ballet dancer.

"You should leave that for the maids to do," said he.

She looked up suddenly, straight at him, and the whole light from the window struck on her face, showing how few lines thirty-six years had brought to it. Though there was something hard and changeless in the impression she gave, the stiff hair-dressing of the period became her. Her hair was as glossy as satin, very brown, and banded above her forehead to meet the rows of "cannon curls" above her ears. It was drawn up from the back and stood in two high loops, tied with a black bow above her parting. Her eyes were of a keen light blue, with brows finely arched; her face full, yet narrow; reminding one, in its too long, too smooth contours, of one of those set-looking female faces in illustrated books of English history. She had a firm figure, broad white teeth, and a look of youth mixed with the manner of maturity. It was a month since she had put off her mourning for Matthew, and her high-waisted gray dress with close stripes of pale blue looked new. She was not pretty, scarcely handsome, certainly not beautiful, but she was what a

Digitized by Google

man—a young man especially—would call "a good-looking woman."

"I wish you would not prick your fingers on my account," said Eustace as she resumed her work.

"Oh, Emma is busy," she replied, rather shortly.

The tassel whirled again.

"Aythan is a strange fellow," he began, after a pause.

"I know that," replied Hester, with a little laugh; "he is beyond me."

"He 's sulky."

"And pray, why?"

"He objects to my manners to women, I believe."

"To women? What women?" said Hester, leaning back in her chair and putting down her needle.

"Hardly a woman—Mad Moll," replied Eustace, narrowing his eyes and smiling. "He takes everything seriously."

"And you take nothing!" she exclaimed, with a sudden vehemence.

"Oh, Hester!"

"Hush! You are not to call me that, Eustace!"

"But why—who hears? While your aunt was here, did I ever do it once? And why must it be different? I have never called you anything else when we are alone, have I?"

"You did at first."

"At first! That is long ago."

"Eustace, Aunt Mary's tongue is a dangerous thing; she ——"

"What do I care for your Aunt Mary's tongue?"

"Ah, but you don't understand. She spoke to me more than once in a most annoying way."

"But what did she say? A woman with such a

Digitized by Google

nose has no right to speak to any one but her Maker."

"She said that my position here is not—not delicate; that I have no business to be living here alone with two young men."

"Then dispense with Aythan. That will only leave one," said Eustace.

"If you will not be serious there is no use in talking!" cried Hester, getting up and shutting her workbox, her eyes full of angry tears.

"I *will* be serious," said he. "What did you reply to that?"

"I said I looked upon you as my step-sons. Then she said that no one else would do so, and—oh, Eustace, I hate to tell you!—that you ought to get your commission and leave the place. Will there ever be an end of that eternal commission?"

"And what about Aythan?" inquired Eustace, who had grown serious enough to please anybody.

"She seemed to think that different. He was really adopted by my husband. She said it was you that people would not understand."

"Do you wish me to go, Hester?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Of course not, Eustace."

He got up and went to her, taking her hand.

"Hester, what am I to do?"

"Do?" she cried, turning away; "be reasonable. Oh, Eustace, attend! You must be discreet before others—you must not call me Hester. Now that I am out of mourning I must be doubly careful; the black dress was a barrier to gossip and curiosity. It would be dreadful if there were any fuss—if you had to go away."

Digitized by Google

"But what is all this? Are you not your own mistress? You have never talked like this before."

"I have been tormenting myself and lying awake at night ever since Aunt Mary was here," said she. "What should I do without you? You are the only friend I have had since I came to this house."

The tears rose again.

He had never seen her so much upset; she was a woman in whom tears were so unnatural that he suspected some cause of which he knew nothing. Whether wisdom or ill-nature lay behind the words of the departed guest he was aware that his position might need explaining. He made no mysteries with himself; he had been brought up by Matthew with the army in view, but he had not the slightest desire to work for his living. He had his small allowance and the money wherewith to purchase what Hester had called "that eternal commission." It was his, out and out. When he told himself that Matthew had acted for his own interests in what he had done for him he stated no more than the truth. For his convenience Bridges had allowed him to put off his departure, and now Bridges had departed himself and he was free to do as he pleased. Perhaps it was not very dignified, but there were other things in the world besides dignity; Hester had called him the only friend she had, and she was now absolute mistress at Crishowell. So long as mischief-makers left her alone, all would be well. Why should he go while she needed him? How he hated old women and their tongues!

She faced him again; her eyelashes were wet, but the composed expression she generally wore was

Digitized by Google

coming back, and she sat down and took up her work from the table.

"You would really miss me?" he said, standing before her.

"Of course," she replied. "I should be most unfeeling if I did not."

There was a certain watchful fierceness in her eyes. Birds guarding their young have the same look.

He took her hand again and held it a moment; it seemed as though he were going to kiss her.

She sprang up, pushing past him, and went out of the room; her skirt overturned the slim-legged table and the workbox fell on the floor. The reels of silk and cotton went down in a shower and rolled about round Eustace's feet as he stood looking at the yards of stock, marked with his own initials, lying in a puffy heap.

He picked the thing up and set the table on its legs. Then he opened the long window which Matthew had cut for his wife into the garden and passed through it, leaving everything else where it lay. He could hear Hester's footsteps as she entered her room overhead.

Outside the threshold was a wide stone flag, from either end of which a flight of steps ran to the grass below. He remained standing on it, knowing that she could see him if she looked from the room above. Her window was open and he could almost hear her breathe.

"Mrs. Bridges," he called, turning up his face.

There was no reply for a moment, and then Hester looked out.

"Will you please pick up my reels?" she said.

Digitized by Google

Her voice was quite calm, but her colour was high, and he could see her nostrils moving.

He went in and did as she desired. Her window shut down while he was replacing her possessions, so he betook himself to the study which he and Aythan had occupied jointly since their college days, and sat down among the litter of game-bags, fishing-tackle, and account-books stacked on floor and table. He threw himself back in his chair and stuck his long legs out in front of him, whistling. The notes came clear and running from his pursed lips, like the mellow ripple of a blackbird, for he was musical through and through, and the sound flowed as a commentary to his thoughts. He had learned a good deal in the last half-hour, but the knowledge was scarcely new; Hester's flight from the drawing-room had told him no more than he had practically known for some time. All the same it seemed to bring him more definitely face to face with reality. There were days, not so far back in his experience, when he had admitted himself in love with her; he had admitted it, yet known in his heart that he was not. He had liked to cheat himself, because he knew just how far the deception would go, and because it was a pleasant deception. He had cultivated it, and it had gained hold on him with all the wonderful strength of an acquired taste. His love of approbation, his love of comedy, his interest, had all helped it on. Proximity—that worker of magic—had lent a hand, too. With its assistance he had given himself many inexpensive thrills, and screwed himself up to a real enjoyment of them. He understood Hester as her husband and Aythan had never tried to understand her. The one had looked upon

Digitized by Google

her without curiosity, the other without comment. He alone knew how skin-deep was the calm that sat on her so naturally, and how much of her acceptance of the merely suitable was the result of stereotyped education and late development. Before her marriage she had lived exclusively among women, and, after it, exclusively among men. Hester Corbett had no suspicion of any point of view but the feminine one; small wonder if, to Hester Bridges, the proportions of life had become different.

Eustace was not introspective for introspection's sake; he was so because he had not much to occupy him. He might have been ambitious had he expected less of fate, and it was to his undoing that such advantages as he had enjoyed had all been brought to his feet without effort of his own. Though that had taught him not to move a finger till a thing was within his reach it had given him a compensating faculty of seeing opportunities. His talent was less with the rod than the landing net.

He knew beyond a doubt what his landing-net had brought him in; if Hester did not love him already she was on the verge of doing so, and now, though he had anticipated it and even played for it, the certainty made him grave. The worst of it was that there could be no pausing where they stood, either for himself or for her, and he had hardly made up his mind whether he would fain go forward or back. To step back might break up the idle smoothness of his days, with their accompaniment of ease, varied by the pleasant absences in London which he allowed himself from time to time. Hester would mean all these on a permanent footing were he to take her seriously. How if he found himself compelled to

Digitized by Google

the routine of soldiering which Matthew had marked out for him, to foreign voyages and service in rough countries, to curtailment of liberty? He had no mind for any of these. He hated responsibility as he hated hardship and the shoulderings of a world where effort was a necessity. He had no quarrel with life; he was well off and he knew it.

Men had married women ten and fifteen years their seniors without repentance, and there was only a difference of eight years between himself and the woman in the room above. There might be forty before them of solid leisure, and no special reason that she should pre-decease him. At her death Aythan would succeed her; but, meantime, Aythan was as much on sufferance at Crishowell House as he was himself; and who was to say when he might leave it? For all his cousin's regard for every acre that had been Matthew's, something told Eustace that he would scarcely fit into his place, should the present order give way to the one he was contemplating. He had none of his own love of ease, and his very face had the restrained virility of a man capable of taking and giving hard knocks in the struggle of the world. And, should anything happen to him, he, Eustace, eldest son of his father's next brother, would be the heir. But Hester now held the horn of plenty, and he had only to reach out and take it. He felt quite sure that he might do with it as he would, for, in common with many men, he had no doubt but that he would sway his wife completely.

On the other hand, he understood that what feeling he had for her was unreal, the result of proximity; an easy distraction, easily come by. He had

Digitized by Google

never been in love in his life, though women had played the same part in his college experiences as they had played in those of his companions. He wondered what people would say were he to marry Hester Bridges; he did not care, particularly, but to be pointed at as the young husband of an old wife was scarcely an alluring prospect. Would the neighbourhood point at him? Hardly, he thought, as he remembered Aunt Mary's remark that, though her niece might look on the young men as her step-sons, nobody else would. And Hester was well-looking, well-dressed; one who appeared certainly five years short of her age; one who would do him no discredit. They could go away after their marriage and stay away a year, or more if necessary; long enough to let the local mind get accustomed to their deed before it should be called upon to welcome them. There was a great deal to be said for the arrangement. He wished he could get an outside opinion upon it, but, unfortunately, his cousin's would be the only available one. The bare idea made him smile.

He asked himself as he looked round on the paraphernalia of Aythan's occupation, which suggested him so vividly, whether he really liked him; it was a difficult question to answer, for though they had been excellent friends as boys, as men they did not stand on quite the same footing. If any one had told him that he was afraid of his cousin he would have laughed aloud, not because he would be ashamed to admit it, but because he would have thought it pre-eminently untrue. So far no one had known Eustace so well as he knew himself, yet there was a limit even to his self-comprehension.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IV

"THE GREEN JINER"

It would be difficult, nowadays, to imagine the state of slow-moving ferment that prevailed in villages where the yearly "feast" was about to come round. Unlike most of its compeers, Crishowell had chosen to hold its licensed jollification at the end of June instead of at the end of harvest.

Here, on the border-line of two countries, where a man whose mother-tongue was English had neighbours a mile away who spoke Welsh alone, a strange mingling of accent and language prevailed. There were English-speaking Welshmen with a smattering of broad Herefordshire that rang absurdly on their ascending intonations, and Englishmen whose few words of Welsh were strung on a stout thread of h'less talk. Such a gathering as Crishowell feast showed every variety of the mixture, and, if English prevailed in the loud voice of the festivity, it was only because the quicker Welshman, whose wits jumped more readily with his interests, found the latter better served by two languages than by one.

The heavy summer green, which made a background to the revels, was suffocating under its layer of dust as the preparations went forward round

Digitized by Google

"The White Cow." Children passing on the road would peep warily through the hedge into the orchard to get stolen glimpses of the rows of benches at its nearer end. The "mounty-bags" were coming, and, as the sight of the tumblers and stilt-walkers, who came under this denomination, would cost a penny, the scene of their exploits was already sacred ground.

In the village lane two sturdy women were baking at the hastily built oven, which faced the path just outside Jane Dolley's house, and a sympathetic smell of pies could be enjoyed as far off as the church gate. Earthen jars of milk, sent by the farmers and slopping over in the grasp of their emissaries, had been, for days past, among the common features of the road; and Sarah Ukyn, who had come down from one of the hovels in the straggling hamlet of Wern, high up in the parish near the mountain, stood, her red arms akimbo, weary with the stirring of puddings.

"Where be we to leave the puddin's for to-night?" she inquired, as she came out to the threshold of Jane's abode.

Near the oven the huddle of petticoats containing Jane Dolley straightened itself.

"To be sure I never thought o' that," remarked its occupant, raising herself from the attitude of a half-shut penknife to that of an open one. "They 'll come to no 'arm in my kitchen surely, will they?"

"Too near the path," said Sarah, smiling with large knowingness.

"My! ye 'd need to be as strong as Mad Moll to be off wi' the potful ye 've got yonder," replied Jane, pointing to the kitchen.

Digitized by Google

"There 's nothin' too 'ot nor too 'eavy for a thief," observed Mrs. Ukyn, solemnly. "Best put 'em i' the church."

Jane Dolley's countenance expressed all her sense of the yawning gap which lay between orthodoxy and dissent. She almost choked. Sarah, though English, was chapel-bred; her mouth now extended half across her face, and her vast figure shook with an ungodly humor. She was one of those whose slow bodies are mere ambushes for their unexpectedly nimble minds. To the unwary she was a curse. Her small eyes devoured her companion's plight. In person she was not unlike a resolute pig. Before Jane could find speech she had returned to the kitchen, where the bubbling had grown excessive, and left her to adjust her mind to a foreign point of view as best she might.

Jane Dolley looked upon the feast more as a lapse than an anniversary, and it was almost under protest that she took her yearly part in the preparations for it. Judging by its results there was something to be said for her feeling; sore heads and addled brains were among the minor effects of the isolated burst of excitement which disjointed the dull routine of agricultural life; the ensuing lost places, queasy stomachs, and empty pockets were, to many, the only unbefogged memories of the occasion. The excited girls and heated young men let loose by evening to find their homeward ways together through the darkness knew its results, possibly for a lifetime; and strong drink, like a torch lit in a black night, had a fell way of revealing the greed, lust, and envy which some sentimentalists believe to be decreased by contact with the soil, but

Digitized by Google

which lurk in all communities, rustic or urban, of this buffeting world.

And, before the entertainment, things were not much better. It did not do to let your poultry get far afield. A duck here, or a pullet there, were not things that lay heavy on the rural conscience. An owner who knew his brood to a feather as it wagged and waddled from barn to pond might come face to face with its members as they emerged from the maw of that leveller, the pot, and be none the wiser. It was a guilty season.

The great day dawned on Crishowell in the midst of a wave of heat; the burning blue spanning the world was dim behind a veil of sultry atmosphere and tremulous vibrations of air throbbed visibly above the ground. The wych-elm, near the door of "The Cow," was encircled by a temporary wooden bench, and old women, who had walked from Llangarth before the sun was well up, were setting out their baskets of cakes and nuts. Tuning fiddles squeaked periodically, their outcries voicing the suppressed fervor of public excitement; in a triangular field at the end of the orchard swings and giddy-go-rounds stood like skeletons against the greenness.

Announced by a cloud of dust kicked up by attendant children, a procession of pies and dumplings from the village travelled towards the inn. Wheelbarrows and bags staggered and swung under the delicacies they held, and, below the apple-trees, the long tables were set like so many altars awaiting the advancing sacrifice.

By midday the orchard was full and general interest converged upon the mugs and platters being

Digitized by Google

set out; only the children raced about after their kind, heedless of the onslaughts of their mothers, who were anxious to have them under their wings when the rush for places should begin. The savory smell from the inn premises was almost unbearable; young men nudged each other covertly, old ones licked their lips, and the crowd grew gradually closer. When the last dish was set the oldest man in the parish was asked to give the signal, which he did by waving his staff over his head.

Like a mill-stream when the sluice is opened, like a flock at a fallen gate, the living mass surged upon the benches. Some few of the girls, to whom traditions of fashionable female delicacy had filtered through channels of domestic service, hung back; and those whose admirers were fervid enough to remember their existence at such a time pushed them gallantly into empty places. The married men, with whom Cupid had ceased to concern himself, sat down in blocks of five and six together, as far as possible from their wives; even the children, fitted with slaps into their places, became impressed and ceased to pull each other's hair. The sun poured down on the assembly, scarcely mitigated by the sparse shade of the apple-leaves.

"Seems like as Ukyn 'ud get nothin'," observed Sarah to Jane Dolley as they found themselves side by side when the meal had begun; "'t is n't often 'e be late for 'is victuals."

Jane made no reply beyond looking additionally respectable. Her companion's husband was a man about whom lurid rumours were apt to hang; for such settled work as was done by the family was done by Sarah. Ukyn picked up what jobs he could.

Digitized by Google

"This here be a proper good duck," slyly observed a man who was enjoying himself opposite; "it 'll be a pity if 'e do come too late for it. Ukyn have a fine notion o' powltry, I 'm told."

Sarah made no reply. Ducks and geese were a sore point, for her husband had once or twice been connected with their disappearance. The speaker was an old enemy who had never forgiven Ukyn some rough handling.

"'E 'll be 'ere, never fear," he remarked again, leaning over the table; "Ukyn don't lose much. 'E can teach ye how many beans makes five."

"'E can teach ye how many clouts makes a hidin'," observed Sarah. "'E 's done that afore now."

A snigger broke from their corner of the table.

Sarah went on with her food, as little disturbed as a browsing animal. The heat had made her cheeks shine.

"I don't mind if I 'ave another mouthful o' this." she said, handing her empty plate up the table; "send it up-along to the pot, young feller."

The recipient passed it on with a wink at his companions. Mrs. Ukyn leaned back, her arms folded; in intervals of business she had a way of abstracting herself from her surroundings not common in a class whose outlook is entirely personal.

"There be Ukyn!" she exclaimed suddenly, as a head appeared beyond the hedge dividing road and orchard. "Come on, Tom, or there 'll be nowt for 'e but the pickin's! Put thy leg through the briers, lad, an' take a short cut—there be a place 'ere!"

She began to slide herself sideways along the bench to make room for him. The man took her

Digitized by Google

advice and slipped through the hedge with the nicety of long practice. His own advantage had long forbidden him to look upon his wife as a non-entity, yet his attitude towards her was strictly that of other men towards the necessary woman; the unwholesome knowledge that she would never fail him sanctioned an outward contempt for a person he thought uncommonly well of in the depth of his mind. He took no notice of her beckonings nor of the place she was clearing for him at the expense of other people's ribs, but strode on to the far end of the table where he was received with a good deal of consideration by the looser-minded among the guests.

"'Edges don't stand much i' 'the Green Jiner's' way," observed the man opposite.

Tom Uykn and his wife lived in Wern village, a clustered handful of dwellings which hardly deserved the name of cottages. High up it lay among the lanes that crawled towards the mountain and ended upon the lower slopes of unenclosed turf; the rough stone hovels were so much one with the ground on which they stood, that, but for its smoke, the squalid hamlet clinging to the hillside among broom and thorn was scarcely to be distinguished by those in the valley. Round it were thickets of stunted growth, the last wind-blown stragglers of the woods that flourished below. Grim-looking hollows whence the stone for its building had been quarried made playgrounds for the children it contained; over some the kindly turf had grown; some were choked with nettles.

The only pretence of an industry carried on in the village was a semi-illicit trade in "whiskets" and

Digitized by Google

besoms, the raw material for which precedent had made it allowable to cut from the neighbouring scrub. Between Wern people and the agent of Sir Helbert Bucknall, on whose land the hamlet stood, there was eternal embarrassment; for while the agent allowed himself to be conveniently blind to a theft which did little harm to his employer's pocket, the owner was a hard man; one impossible in the present state of society when socialism is a fad of the rich and subservience an affectation in the poor. Sir Helbert reaped where he had not sown and gathered where he had strawed very little indeed, and the only thing which saved these, his light-fingered tenants, from calamity, was the fact that he lived principally at his place in Herefordshire and seldom came near his mountain belongings.

But, while the stunted covert from which the besoms were cut was almost legitimate plunder, there were stories which troubled the agent. Down the hill where the wood was of marketable value were traces of the knife, and mutilated spots weakened the hedgerows. Farmers and their men had tales of figures carrying away bundles in the moonlight, and the inefficient village constabulary of those days had been warned more than once to keep its weather eye open and to fix it especially upon Tom Ukyn. Crishowell folk found their smug contempt of Wern people comfortably fed by what they heard, and the Green Jiner, as they had named Ukyn, became a kind of whetstone for verbal righteousness. "The Green Jiner 'll come for you!" was a favourite threat with Crishowell mothers.

Ukyn's personal appearance did him no good. He was a tall, angular man, with a slight stoop and

Digitized by Google

a way of walking that was almost a challenge to the law. When at last, he leaned against the nearest obstacle; when moving, he seemed to stroll, though he covered more ground in a minute than his neighbors did in two; when speaking, he looked beyond the person he addressed. The streaks of gray beginning to show in his beard gave him no dignity, though a battered hat and a coat which a scarecrow might have despised could not hide a kind of misplaced grace of movement that fitted him better than his clothes. The name of the Green Jiner had been given him because his besoms were believed to be made, not from the hill-scrub, but from the forbidden green boughs of the valley.

The welcome which his fellow-feasters gave Ukyn was a pure tribute to wickedness, for he was no talker, and added nothing to the gaiety of the world. He was a man who never became absorbed in his company, mainly because, wherever he went, his own atmosphere enveloped him completely. No one could imagine how he had fallen into matrimony, and it was said, commonly, that Sarah had haled him to the altar, though every one was well assured that the constable alone could take him anywhere where he did not wish to go. The miracle was that, so far, that functionary had never done it. He sat busy with his food, his deep-set eyes on the plate before him, scarcely answering when he was spoken to, and as much apart among the ruddy Hodges on either hand as a stoat among domestic animals.

By two o'clock provisions gave out and cider ran low in the barrels. The tables were hustled away to give room to the "mounty-bags," whose tawdry splendour made a bright spot of color where a half-

Digitized by Google

grown youth was standing on his head to the sound of pan-pipes and a little drum. The nut-sellers from Llangarth plied up and down between the benches on which elderly matrons sat regarding the spectacle and remarking sourly on the younger women. At the end of the orchard the fiddle was encouraging half-a-dozen couple of dancers, and the little field was astir with preparations for a sack-race.

The lads who were to adventure their persons were being tied into the bags; one or two had fallen straight down upon the grass without further ado, and were rearing themselves to and fro, like so many caterpillars, in their efforts to rise. The effects of beer and cider were showing on the male half of the company, and the man who had sat opposite to Sarah Ukyn was lounging about, enjoying the unwonted glibness of an agreeably loosened tongue. Ukyn leaned against an apple-tree and watched the inmates of the sacks as their friends hauled them up and set them in a row on the starting-line. Whether he were drunk or sober no one could tell; his eyes had the same remote expression and his fingers twisted a leaf he had pulled from the branch above his head.

People came crowding round, for the race had started, and a couple of young bloods, distancing their fellows, were advancing in precarious leaps to the goal, while the writhing forms of the other competitors lay in their wake. Shouts of laughter went up as they passed, their checks distended, their hair flying, and the strained expression of apprehensive insecurity on their faces. As the second man hurtled by he tripped, lurching against Ukyn and hitting him in the ribs as he fell. The sack was

Digitized by Google

loose enough to give his hands a little play inside it, and he clung to the Green Jiner's leg as though he were drowning. Ukyn stooped, as if to pull him up.

"Let 'im be, man! Leave 'im!" cried the starter.

"Give 'im a kick!" roared a bystander tipsily.

The man in the sack, hearing this, clung more convulsively; and Ukyn's breeches, which had long passed middle age, began to tear where a rent above the knee disclosed a finger's length of skin. The man who had spoken to Sarah was in a transport of delight.

"'Old on, you!" he bawled, slapping his thigh and thrusting himself through the gathering knot of spectators; "stick to 'im! 'E'll know where to find a new pair quick enough! Plenty of clothes-lines left out o' nights hereabouts!"

The rent ran slowly round Ukyn's leg; when it had completed its circle the nine inches or so of fustian dropped bodily in a ring about his boot and the man in the sack rolled on the ground.

The whole orchard broke into a roar, and, as the successful competitor had reached the winning-post right end upwards, the onlookers began to release the fallen champion.

The Green Jiner stepped out of the circular fragment; he was very pale, and his eyes focussed themselves somewhere over the shoulder of Susan's late neighbour. As he came towards him, the man, who carried just enough liquor to make him confident in act and speech, pointed, with a guffaw, to his bare knee. His laugh was like the crow of a cock.

Ukyn stepped up close to him, his face the colour of chalk and his tongue moistening his lips.

Digitized by Google

"Best give over, Ned Prosser," said a young fellow standing by, who knew something of the Green Jiner's character. "Come away, now," and he pulled his friend's sleeve.

For reply Prosser laughed again and struck Ukyn across the cheek with his hat, which he held in his hand.

The Green Jiner sprang forward like a cat; the action was so quick that Prosser was not ready for it and received a blow on the mouth that cut his lips against his teeth.

"That 'll stop your talk," observed Mrs. Ukyn, who had come up, attracted by the noise; "give it 'im, Tom."

The glamour of cider had showed humanity to Ned Prosser as a thing to be dealt jauntily with, but the blow changed his point of view; for he had a strong head and not enough drink inside him to incapacitate him. He struck out solidly at Ukyn and hit the empty air where his head had been.

By this time the greater part of Crishowell parish had gathered round; a fight was a heaven-sent addition to the entertainment and the thought that it had something more vital at its foundation than horseplay lent it an acceptable human interest. The men were frankly delighted; the women looked on from a little distance, but, though one or two of the more emotional whimpered, they never took their eyes off the circle in which the combatants stood.

Prosser was a heavy man and he could hit hard; Ukyn had worsted him once before, and the smarting memory hovered about him while he struck out. As the fight went on Ukyn began to suffer; but, as

Digitized by Google

each stroke of a pick-axe brings the buried treasure nearer to the light, so each blow he took seemed to uncover the wild-cat endurance—that endurance which has its root in savagery—sleeping under his ragged shirt. And Prosser, though heavy, was soft.

Sarah had seen a good many fights in her time; she stood watching while her husband dodged, noting comfortably the demoralising effect that repeatedly hitting nothing may have on an adversary. As the bigger man paused, breathless, and the two stood back a moment from each other, she pushed forward towards Ukyn, holding out a mug of beer she had fetched from the inn.

"Fight on, Tom," she cried; "I 'll carry your bones home in my apron 'afore ye be beaten!"

But he had gone out of her range, and he thrust her back and hurled himself afresh on Prosser. Sarah put her mug down at the foot of a tree.

"That 'll do very well for me, missus," observed a man as he stooped towards it. "I never could abide waste, not I."

She scarcely heard him, for matters were now coming to a crisis. Prosser was hitting at random; what patience he had been able to maintain was, by this time, worn out and every blow of Ukyn's had its effect. He was growing very dizzy from combined hard usage and cider, for the morning's drinking had been a bad preparation for an afternoon of fisticuffs. He staggered backwards against a friend.

But the Green Jiner was glaring like an animal; there was something terrible, elemental, in his savage white face. Little as the dull-witted peasants looking on understood of anything but the bare obvious, they had a vague sense of discomfort, as

Digitized by Google

though the devil's shadow had fallen among the homely vistas of the orchard boughs.

"Stand up!" yelled Ukyn; "stand up! I've not done for ye yet!"

"'E's got enough, man," said the ploughman who was holding Prosser.

"Shove 'im up, I tell ye! Shove 'im up on 'is feet! I'll kill 'im yet if I've to go on leatherin' 'im till mornin'!"

"'E can't take any more, I tell ye," said the ploughman again as Prosser made no sign of revival.

"Can't 'e?" cried Ukyn; "I'll show ye that!"

And he twisted himself out of the grasp laid on him by a person who had slipped, unobserved, into the ring; his body seemed to contain the soul of some frenzied beast. Aythan Waring had a feeling of almost physical sickness as he looked at him; he remembered a mad dog he had once seen.

"That's enough, Tom Ukyn," said the young man in his steady voice.

"By the Lawk, you be right! 'E've purty nigh done for that there lump o' muck," observed Sarah, looking with solid satisfaction at the demoralised enemy.

Ukyn turned his pale face on Aythan.

"Come, there's a good fellow," said the latter, taking him by the arm again; "you must stop this now. Get a bucket of water, some of you, and wash that man's face. What's the quarrel?"

Twenty tongues began the history. The Green Jiner stood sullen by Aythan, whose hold seemed to have a quieting effect on him. It was impossible to hear a word of anything.

Digitized by Google

"Come and put your head under the pump," said the young man.

He went off to the back of the inn, still holding Ukyn. Sarah followed, and the three disappeared into the yard.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER V.

NINE NOTCHES

AYTHAN WARING came down again towards the village an hour later. He had found some trouble in persuading Ukyn that a glorious retreat would be the wisest end he could put to his conquering part at the feast. But, with Sarah's help, he managed to start him homewards, and he resolved to go part of the way with the couple, lest the Green Jiner should think better of his action and turn about. The company at "The Cow" was in an inflamed state, and he did not want to have it plunged into uproar.

By the time he left them the sun was beginning to slant downwards, and he strolled leisurely between the leafy hedges, with the rush of the Digedi coming pleasantly to his ears through the covert shading its valleyward course. As he drew near the spot at which the brook crossed his way he kept on by the waterside instead of turning over the footbridge to the village. The lane ended in an abrupt drop where periodical floods had washed a chasm and swallowed a mouthful of landslip. High above the swirl, and scarcely more than a dozen yards from the gap, stood an old house, too small for a manor, too large for a cottage, by an overgrown

Digitized by Google

garden whose vegetation almost submerged the wall that, like a sunk fence, divided it from the path. Flowers and bushes had their roots well-nigh level with its coping, a tree or two rose from the general luxuriance that a patch of good soil and the neighbourhood of the water had produced, and, crowning the tangle, the chimneys of the ancient place stood, red and mellow, over the damp-looking brickwork. Rank elder and insiguificant ashes darkened this fag-end of the lane, arching over Aythan's head. A stranger crossing the bridge might never suspect the proximity of the dwelling, nor guess at the half-ruinous garden, unless it was June, at which time the blue of monkshood and larkspur was shot in electric splashes by the sun through moving leaves.

While Aythan parted with his companions, a little way below Wern village, Benny Bowen, the inhabitant of this oddly-hidden backwater, was in his element; for, to the old man, the pleasure of applying his peculiar point of view to his flowers was the greatest imaginable. The girl who was talking with him in the garden stood, her hazel eyes intent upon his face, as they paused before each plant.

"This be a marvellous thing," said the old man, stopping beside a spike of monkshood taller than himself. "You hearken to me, miss, an' I 'll tell ye the meaning thereof. 'T is Adam an' Eve weeping and mourning over the Tree of Life. Look in, miss, into the flower; there be the poor little things wi' their black heads, so sorrowful in a mourning condition, stooping over it. The poison did begin then. Do 'e see where the seed be coming? 'T is mostly in three, and that represents the Trinity. A marvellous thing, as I say."

Digitized by Google

"It's wonderful, Benny. I never knew about that before."

"Ah, I be purty old," said Benny; "an' I 've seen a power o' things. Come you on to they bushes near the wall. Do 'e see that there flower peerin' between the leaves?"

"That 's what our gardener calls blue scabious," said Barbara.

"Ah! do 'e?" exclaimed Benny. "Well, I know better. 'T is Devil-i'-the-bush."

He gathered a blossom and held it close to the large round spectacles on his nose.

"There be the scales of the Serpent," he continued, stroking the calyx with his thumb; "an' brimstone torches inside, plain enough, too; an' his old brazen face in the midst. A dangerous character."

The girl smiled.

"And this?" she asked, pointing to the great yellow disc of a St.-John's-wort.

"Here 't is different," said Benny; "a flower for holy people. Inside is Our Saviour, the Pillar an' Ground o' Truth, with His followers round Him. There He stands in the middle and the Elect about Him like a crown. A gold-coloured flower, too; gold, like the kingdom of heaven."

They strolled on; Benny's mild but uncouth face was lit by an inner excitement. Where Barbara saw the accustomed beauty of growing things he read in his flowers so many pictures of the beauty of the world to come.

She stretched out her hand to draw a spray of small, thorny roses towards her.

His face lost its enthusiasm.

Digitized by Google

"Don't you touch that rose, miss. It killed one lady. It did indeed. A young lady had the choice o' three to marry, and one in her eye besides these. So she did call each by the name of a flower, and her father did tell the gardener to choose for her and say which were the best for her to take. Then the gardener said: 'I will choose for you the violet, the lily, and the pink.' An' then she said—

'I will refuse the three;
But in June the red rose buds
And that's the flower for me!

"So she chose the rose, for she had named it for the fourth one. But the rose was all over thorns —a parable, too—for he was n't good to her, an' it killed her. And when she was dyin' she said—

'The willow-tree do twist,
And the willow-tree do twine,
An' I wish I was back i' the arms of the man
That has this heart o' mine.'

And that was her end."

"But she did n't know what was good for her," observed Barbara, at the end of Benny's rather inconsequent story. "I think it is more likely that killed her than the rose. Fancy wishing to be back with him when he had broken her heart! I have no patience with her."

"Maybe; I don't pay the same heed to love tales now as I did in my youth. I thought a sight o' them then."

"Oh, Benny!" cried Barbara; "can't you show me a love-charm? I used to be told long ago that you could make them—I have heard it many times.

Digitized by Google

Oh, Benny, don't refuse! I should so dearly like to see what you do!"

"'T is all forket talk," replied her companion; "don't you pay no heed to it. If love be to come, him 'll come—an' if 'e bean't, 'e won't. Them as is n't to do, can't do. I can prove that to be true, for I mind my mother, an' she was always wishin' to lay by a groat at a time. Well, if so be she got up to threepence halfpenny it was back to threepence again. Never could her get to a groat."

But Barbara was not to be denied. Love and economy had scarcely the same value in her mind.

"Benny, good, kind Benny—to please me," she begged. "There can be no harm in it—it has nothing to do with me. I only want to see how it is done. Don't say no, Benny!"

"Well, well, there 's no harm indeed; but I must go to the kitchen for my knife. You can't do it without that."

He moved off stiffly, leaning on his stick; for rheumatism and much study of his Bible had bent him almost double.

"I can get it!" she cried. "I saw where it lay on the table. Stay there and I will fetch it in a moment."

She darted into the house. Her movements were as quick as her glances; the old man was laughing quietly to himself as she came back holding a clasp-knife.

"It be so fast stuck wi' grease an' dirt," said he, looking at it with disapproval, "that now it be open I can't shut it. 'T is a nasty thing for you to hold."

Digitized by Google

"Oh, but I don't mind that. Come, Benny, tell me what I must do."

"First go we over to the bit o' railing yonder at the end of the garden. 'T is all nonsense, though there be those that it did seem to come square to. Old Tom Evans's son William tried it, I know, an' lo! there was 'Liza Bousberry that he was married to in a month. 'T is flyin' in the face o' Providence if I doan't,' says 'e. 'Her be forty-five,' says 'e, 'an' 'er do squint shockin', but do it I must.' When she died, not so long after, some say as 'e killed 'er—but I don't know, I 'm sure."

They had reached the railing and Benny put the knife into Barbara's hand.

"I can show you here," said he; "but by rights a man or a woman must go to a gate at twelve i' the dark night for eight nights an' cut eight notches; a notch a night. On the ninth night, if it be a woman, a man will come an' she must give him the knife. He will cut the ninth notch then. If it be a man, a woman will come, for sure. Now, I 'll show ye how—cut you the piece this way—a cut to the right an' a cut to the left, an' the little bit 'll fly out. But you must turn the knife about seven times with his blade to the south—this way."

Barbara did not belong to the great legion of helpless women to whom an implement is little more than a chance of mishap. When she had copied Benny's movements she fell to work upon the rail. The blunt, green-stained blade cut a neater notch than he had scored with his stiffened hands.

"I shall do all the eight," she remarked, admiring her dexterity, with her head on one side; "and Heaven knows what may happen."

Digitized by Google

The next notch was begun over a flaw in the wood, and two cuts were, consequently, insufficient.

"Ah, that is not so good," said the girl; "but I must go on. If I did not I should be flying in the face of Providence, like Tom Evans's son William. There; that is better. Now six more."

Benny began to chuckle. He was enough entertained by the silly business in hand to miss the sound of the wicket as it opened and shut; he watched his companion, smiling, as she carried it through.

"There!" she exclaimed, putting the last touch and turning round; "now where is the man?"

As she saw Aythan Waring advancing between the currant bushes she grew first pale and then as pink as the rose de Meaux that had killed Benny's unlucky heroine. If she had been committing a murder, with the old man's help, she could hardly have looked more guilty. Aythan was not near enough to hear anything that was said, but he was embarrassed, too. A black patch showing through the greenery had told him that old Bowen was in his garden, and he entered, lured by the cool isolation of this place, so remote from the dusty world of highroads outside; he did not expect to find a stranger in it.

Introductions were beyond Benny. Aythan hurriedly took off his hat and stood still.

"I was passing—at least I thought I would come in to see you," he explained. "I have n't seen you for a long time."

It was exactly two days since he had met the old man in the road; but there is no such enemy to verbal truth as shyness.

Digitized by Google

"Glad to see ye, Master Aythan, that I be."

"And how are you?" continued the newcomer, clutching gratefully at the first recognised form of words he could think of.

"A bit rheumatiky, sir, but very well for an old man. The Lord be main good."

"And you have n't been to the feast?"

"No, no; not I, sir. They be too merry-conceited there for an old feller like me."

Barbara stood by, recovering as best she might from the amazing effect of her charm, and half-consciously trying to shut the knife she held. She might as well have attempted to bend the bow of Ulysses.

If Aythan had a vanity it was based on his very considerable personal strength; besides which he had a well-founded fear that Barbara might cut herself.

"Can I not do that?" he said, coming closer.

She gave him the knife.

"No wonder it will not shut," he remarked, turning to the old man; "the hinge is clogged with rust and the blade is no better. It can't be of much use."

"Indeed, but it do cut well enough," observed Benny, as he looked at Barbara with a certain simple malice.

Aythan was fond of all tools; had there been a grindstone within sight he would have begun the regeneration of the knife without further ado.

"Let me see," said he.

Before Barbara could realise what was happening he made a step towards the rail and drew the blade twice across the wood. The chip fell out and dropped at her feet.

Digitized by Google

"I must go now, Benny," said she, her face in a flame; "I have stayed a long time and I must go to get my pony. I will come again to see you another day."

The old man's heart was back with his flowers; his visitor might be distracted by the unlooked-for end of the love-charm, but he was not going to let it cut short the inspection of his treasures if he could help it.

"But, miss, ye have n't see them all!" he exclaimed, putting out his hand like a child afraid of being deserted; "come down there yonder; there 's them tall yellow lilies—the Lights o' Jerusalem I do call 'em—you have n't seen how beautiful they be. Look, Master Aythan, ye don't know them neither; 't is a sight makes ye think of the heavenly places where they be growin' for the redeemed to see their way by—an' there 's the day-lilies, too, the Golden Trumpets."

He went along the path and his companions followed, for Barbara was sure that he would never let her go till she had made the round of the flowers. They went in single file, Aythan last; his confidence was returning, and he noticed how the alluring tendrils of the girl's nut-coloured hair lay in a little cloud against the cream of her neck. As he looked he began to be glad, instead of sorry, that he had invaded Benny while he entertained company.

Once that her attention was on other things Barbara took herself to task for her foolishness. What was there remarkable in the fact of not being Benny's sole visitor to-day? She had heard that many people came to see him; for he had lived long enough in the place to be something of an institu-

Digitized by Google

tion. The incident of the notches was far too childish to be troubled about, and she could have beaten herself to think she had shown such embarrassment on Aythan's appearance. What would he think? He must suppose her to be a tiresome, countrified wench, set all on edge by the sight of a well-dressed male. She wondered who he was; for her home lay some miles across the mountain, and she knew nothing of Crishowell. Benny Bowen had left her father's service fifteen years before, and this was the first time she had seen him since early childhood, when, as an underling in Mr. Troup's garden, he had wheeled her in wheelbarrows and jumped her over flower-beds during the relaxed vigilance of a dull-minded nurse, stiff with the proprieties of her day. She smiled as she looked at the old fellow's bowed back and realised that he had been her first playmate. He had seemed just as aged to her then as he did now.

Having smoothed her ruffled feelings she turned to the young man treading in her steps.

"You must tell me your name, sir," she said. "I am Barbara Troup; I live at Tillestone Court."

"My name is Aythan Waring," replied he. "I know Tillestone, for I have often ridden past it. But the last time I saw it it was unoccupied."

"My father and I came to live there a couple of months ago. Benny is an old servant of ours, and it was only lately that I heard he was settled here. He was very kind to me when I was young."

Aythan smiled, for the words came oddly from the red-lipped embodiment of youth and freshness in front of him.

Digitized by Google

But Benny had allowed Barbara's thoughts to stray from his garden long enough.

"Look at this 'ere, miss," he began, pointing to the heart-shaped pendant blossoms of a pink dialytra; "this be Ladies' Reticule, an' it 's a lady, too. There 's the veil over her head; there 's her body; there 's her two arms and waist. Remarkable; one of the marvels of creation."

"I have always heard it called young-man's-false-heart," replied Barbara. And then, as the words took her mind back to the love-charm, the blood flew to her face. Certainly luck was against her this afternoon.

She said no more, merely admiring as she was bid; and when they had come round again to the wicket by the house, she held out her hand.

"Now, good-bye, Benny. I must hurry away as fast as I can, or I sha'n't get home till dark. My pony is at the blacksmith's."

"But I will get him for you!" exclaimed Aythan, as she turned to him. "Have you come without a servant?"

"Oh, yes," laughed she; "I am well accustomed to that, though I suppose some people would think it strange. My father stays a great deal in the house, and I have to do many things alone."

"It 's a good many miles to Tillestone," remarked Aythan; "and you will have to go by the mountain."

"That is the best part of it; there is such a good track all the way once you leave the lanes. I can canter home most comfortably. I suppose your sisters would not be allowed to do that," she added.

"I have none," said he, with his hand on the wicket. "I will go at once to the blacksmith's."

Digitized by Google

"Benny, who is that?" asked Barbara, the moment he was out of earshot.

"That be Master Aythan Waring, that lives at Crishowell House, up the fields there. A fine young feller 'e be, too. Adopted 'e were by Squire Bridges —him an' his cousin. The widow lives there now; a fine, fashion-made madam, I do hear; but she don't come about much. Well, to think I never gave ye a rose, miss!"

"Don't give me the rose de Meaux," said she; "it is too thorny."

"Thorns? A' believe ye! Not that; I 'll give ye the purest white rose. Her cometh out crimson i' the bud and afterwards groweth to the purest white, like we through the Atonement o' Christ. An emblem of the purity of Christ all throughout."

It took him some time to cut the flower, for Aythan had shut the knife, and now it was impossible to make it open. By the time he had severed the stem the pony's hoofs sounded on the path.

"Please take him to that log," said Barbara, pointing over the wall to a felled trunk that lay near Benny's door. When she was mounted she turned to bid him good-bye.

"I am coming a part of the way with you, Miss Troup," said he. There was a quiet defiance in his eyes as he looked up at her. "You can't go alone," he went on, as she was going to protest. "To-day is Crishowell feast, and the lanes will be full of people going home—drunk, perhaps; not fit for you to pass alone in these narrow ways, at any rate."

"I am not afraid," said Barbara proudly. "I shall have to ride fast, too, for it is getting late."

"You cannot gallop, or even trot, up these steep

Digitized by Google

lanes," answered Aythan; "and I mean to walk by you till you get to the foot of the mountain. Then you can go at what pace you please on the grass-tracks, and there will be plenty of room to avoid anybody."

As he spoke he put his hand on the bridle and they went forward together.

"Really, sir, it is unnecessary," said the girl, with a touch of pettishness.

"I am coming," said he, almost roughly; and Barbara held her peace.

They had gone some way before the little cloud lifted from between them and they fell into talk. He slipped back from the pony's head and walked at her knee; the way between the hedge-crowned banks was so narrow that her foot touched his hand from time to time as the little animal avoided the boulders of stone which thrust themselves up through the earth in rain-washed places.

Such womankind as Aythan had met he had met at Cambridge. There he had known a dozen or so of ladies, young and old, who had attracted him little enough, and a sprinkling of other women. Since that time his lines had fallen in this little valley, where, but for Hester, he never saw a petticoat that was not likely to confront him on the first cottage clothes-line he might pass. He felt a pleasure—of which Eustace would little have suspected him—in the contact of the skirt that fell to Barbara's stirrup. She wore no habit, but rode in her light summer dress, a golden vision against the dusty hazels shot with patches of evening light. Her gloves were stuffed into the saddle-pocket, and her hands were as firm and capable-looking as those of a boy; she

Digitized by Google

had something of the gallant look of that armed and errant maidenhood that rides joyously through Spencer's great romance. When they passed the frequent gates into fields the low sun burst through, irradiating the outer fringe of her hair. To speak strictly, her jaw and cheekbone were too well marked for beauty's most precise aspect; but Aythan, looking up at the flash of brown and cream and red lips, did not think of that. When they came out on the short turf and the great wall of the mountain was ranged before them, they parted. He stood with his arm on the top of the last gate and watched her flitting away at a hand canter.

He had been horribly officious all the afternoon, he thought as he turned homewards; escorting, against their wills, those who needed supervision. He laughed at himself.

But he felt uncommonly happy—absurdly so.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VI

BARBARA LOOKS FOR A BOOK

BARBARA rode steadily along the springing turf; the black pony, his nose turned homewards, took the rise and fall of the ground with the same light-heeled content. Cool had fallen on the blazing day, and here and there a trickle of water threaded the stillness broken by his hoofs. She was dying to look back towards the gate, though she did not do so, and she wondered how long the heavy-browed young man would stand there watching. As the track made a backward loop she caught, for a moment, the picture of a dark spot which might be a figure or the thorn-stump flanking the gate-post. The girl tossed her head, for she was rather annoyed with herself. She had been taken at a disadvantage that afternoon, and, by the time she had risen above it, made to look like a fool in her own eyes, and treated as a child. What business had he to dictate to her? But it was not the dictating that made her toss her head; it was the knowledge that, because of it, she had made up her mind to dislike him and then failed to do so. She hoped he was still at the gate.

When Barbara had told Aythan that she was obliged to do many things alone there had been no shade of self-commiseration in her mind. She was

Digitized by Google

a person who took herself and the things that happened to her with simplicity, and, if her immediate world had been, so far, thinly peopled, she could never remember the day when she had not been able to deal with it exactly as she liked. The fact argued some useful qualities, because, broadly speaking, it is often not easy to do good work with a limited choice of tools. She could hardly recall her mother, and as for her father, his world had been created for himself by himself, and his path was as calculable as that of a planet. There had been governesses, of course, but these ladies, while they lasted, had seen their paths clearly, too, and contrived, for their better convenience, to knock up against nobody. But now it was some time since the last one had vanished, leaving her more completely free to do as she pleased.

Had Clarence Troup remembered that he possessed a daughter of twenty-one the idea would have been disagreeable to him. The consequence was that he did not remember it; for he was one of those people who, when they meet truth walking, naked and unashamed, in the noonday, cover their eyes with one hand, while they offer her their purse and the address of the nearest draper with the other. He had never been a strong man and the fact was worth a good deal to him; consideration for himself, joined to a good income, had saved him from the wear and tear which sapped the vigour of the less fortunate, providing him with a reserve of health that carried him through every effort pleasing to his taste.

His taste governed him. It was his god, his religion, his guiding star; a quality which divided

Digitized by Google

him from the men of that grosser epoch. Half the polite world of the present century is ruled by its furniture, and had Mr. Troup seen the dawn of a day in which even the young haunt salerooms and are wise in Chippendale and Vernis Martin, he would have rejoiced and been exceeding glad, though he would never have haunted them himself, for he did not like crowds.

Whenever he went to the trouble of seeing Barbara at all he saw her from his own point of view, and with an almost Christian knack of divining what he thought the best when absolutely forced to close quarters. He would not have chosen her, certainly; but, as she had been dealt out to him by an undiscriminating Providence, he was forced to provide her, so to speak, with a garment fit to enter his presence. He also provided her with many other garments, concerning himself about their colour and fashion, for he took her from the only standpoint in which she appeared to him passable, namely the picturesque one. He saw her as a shepherdess, sometimes, and insisted on her dining with him in flowered muslin; had it not been for the butler he would almost have made her carry a crook, so great was his sense of pictorial fitness. Sometimes his fancy wandered to dryads—persons whom she resembled much more—and the result would be flowing white. Barbara was quite pleased, for she liked pretty clothes as much as did most girls. He adored the lighter spirit of the eighteenth century, and though he did not take snuff himself, he had an excellent collection of snuff-boxes and carried one invariably in his pocket; had he had the making of all the women in the world—to

Digitized by Google

the exclusion, of course, of servants—he would have made every one of them like Dresden china figures; and it was because his daughter had so little in common with these, either in body or mind, that he systematically forgot her till dinner-time. But, in England, the dinner-hour brings every one to his bearings.

That Barbara feared no one, could saddle a pony, walk many miles, and roamed the country as best pleased her, were facts which did not exist for him. She had not become a hoyden, because, during her youth, they had been much in towns and had never stayed long enough in any one country place for her to get into provincial habits. By the time they were settled at Tillestone, change, like a potter's wheel, had determined her mould and made her into an attractive young woman.

Tillestone lay on the side of the Black Mountain that slopes to the Golden Valley. It had been chosen by Clarence Troup solely on the merits of its appearance, for it was a perfect specimen of the ancient black and white timbered house. It stood among grass paths and clipped yews and was sufficiently removed from vulgar intrusion to suit a man who demanded full leisure for the appreciation of his own refinement. People spoke of it as being "inaccessible," but, as Mr. Troup seldom went beyond his garden, that did not matter; he had the amateur rather than the learned temperament and needed no opportunities for the study of his hobbies, because he never studied them at all. He enjoyed them. Had he been able to find a French château—some miniature Versailles—set down in the country in which circumstances had placed him,

Digitized by Google

he would infinitely have preferred it; but, that being impossible, he merely insisted on a suitable background for himself combined with the comfort he could not find abroad. He had been a good deal in society in his young days, and the few friends he had cared to keep would visit him now and again, wondering that a man who was not far on in middle age should lead such a life. But, as he made them very comfortable, his position did not distress them, and they spent their energies in commiserating his daughter. Commiseration is often delightful; with a touch of criticism, they found it ravishing.

Dinner at Tillestone was served at five o'clock, a late hour for those days, and Barbara did not reach home till it had struck seven. She knew that her father would make no comment, provided that he got his own meal in comfort, and, when she had eaten, she put on a muslin gown, rearranged her hair, and tapped at the door of his sitting-room.

The candles were blazing on the mantelshelf and on the table by which Mr. Troup sat with a book in his hand; their soft shine, falling on his long, petulant face, accentuated no lines and made him look younger than he did by daylight. Shelves of elaborately bound volumes lined the walls and supported a quantity of Sèvres china. The room contained a very inadequate writing-table, and might, for any appearance to the contrary, as well have belonged to a woman; above the fire-place was an exquisite engraving of Lancret's *Mademoiselle de Camargo dancing.*

"I have been to Crishowell to see Benny Bowen," said Barbara as she entered; "it is a long way, so that is why I was late."

Digitized by Google

Mr. Troup closed his book.

"I hope you were in before dark," he said as he held it with a finger between the leaves to keep the place.

"Oh, father!" she exclaimed, smiling as she glanced at the shuttered windows; "it is quite light still. You could easily see to read outside. Why, last Sunday was the longest day."

"And how was Bowen?" inquired he, with something of resignation in his manner.

"Very well indeed, and he sent you his humble duty. Father, where is Crishowell House?"

"At Crishowell, I suppose," said he. "Why?"

"A gentleman called Mr. Waring came to see Benny while we were in the garden. Benny said he came from Crishowell House."

"Oh! I heard that the place belonged to some one called Bridges."

"He is dead," replied Barbara; "and Benny said this was his adopted son. Mrs. Bridges, the widow, lives at Crishowell, too. He called her a 'fine, fashion-made madam.' But he looked as if he did n't like her when he said it."

Mr. Troup smiled.

"One hardly expects to find fashion at Crishowell," he remarked. "And that reminds me, Barbara, that I have told you more than once not to put on that rose-coloured hair-ribbon. It is so much out of keeping with your dress. Why do you do it when I have told you I dislike it particularly?"

"I forgot, sir," she answered, drawing a chair up to a table in the far part of the room. "I will remember it to-morrow."

There was evidently nothing to be got out of her

Digitized by Google

father. He was not apt to be much interested in his neighbours, and those who had waited upon him since his coming to Tillestone were not of the stuff to effect a change.

She considered how she might get more information; there was not so much as a local map in the place by which to make out the site of Crishowell House, for Mr. Troup detested topography. She got up and began to look along the shelves for a county history, and came at last upon a volume of *Mansions and Landed Estates in Herefordshire and Brecknockshire,* which he had bought while looking for a house. It was illustrated, and she took it down and slipped quietly out with her prize.

There was no dew, so she went across the lawn to a garden seat and opened the book on her knee. The date on the title-page was of some dozen years back, and the author had collected the portraits of all the landowners mentioned. Matthew Bridges and his house made, respectively, head- and tail-pieces to the chapters which dealt with them.

She read every word; the house was not imposing, but it had something attractive about it, and she examined every line of Matthew's plain, kindly face, deciding that there could have been no relationship between him and his adopted son. She wished that there had been a portrait of the "fashion-made madam," too, for Benny's expression made such a mouthful that she saw Hester, mentally, as a stout, high-coloured person with a monstrous hat and feathers. For the first time since coming to live in this out-of-the-way place it dawned on Barbara that the sight of a strange face was something exhilarating, and that even an apparition such as

Digitized by Google

she pictured might be an interest. Mr. Waring had told her that he had no sisters; neither had she; and, so far, she had not been concerned at the lack. She was quite sure that it did not concern her now; but a brother—he would be a different thing. It occurred to her that Aythan would make a splendid brother; and, as for his way of settling what she was or was not to do, were he related to her, she would soon put that difficulty right. Yes, she wished he were her brother very much; though, remembering his manner, she admitted something incongruous in the idea. She thought of him walking beside her pony in the steep lanes. Brothers were not like that, certainly.

Then the memory of Benny's charm came back upon her and she sprang up, shutting her book with a snap, and went back to the house.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VII

FROM HEAVEN TO PURGATORY

THE dark patch seen by Barbara was not the thorn-stump.

A superfluous sense of expansion was with Aythan as he went down the hill. Exhilaration flooded him, nerves, muscles, soul, and all, and it seemed that, without rhyme or reason, he had stepped into a new atmosphere, one in which nothing was impossible. He felt that he could walk on for ever and ever, without slackening, without fatigue; scale mountains, turn obstacles into matchwood. The mellowness of falling night lay on a world become suddenly his own; under the power of his hand, under command of his mounting heart. Anxiety and sadness seemed impossible, and, because he had endured so much of these, his present unwarrantable mood was the more of a liberation.

Things had gone ill with him of late, and a discomfort that was no lighter for his growing comprehension of it weighed more heavily as time went. Hester had never liked him—that he knew well enough—though, till now, the fact had made little difference to his relation with Eustace. But his cousin was changing, and while he could scarcely explain to himself in what the change consisted, he

Digitized by Google

saw, looking back over so short a space as three months, how vast it was.

He often considered whether he had done well to stay at Crishowell House, though it was by Hester's direct desire he had done so. He had been told the contents of the will which Matthew had gone out to sign on the day of his accident, and, though never blaming Hester for her acceptance of what chance had made legally hers, he had wondered that she found it possible to continue the old life without embarrassment. But, of late, self-consciousness had been creeping on the household; it was as though one of those impulses which come, apparently, from nowhere was driving them all towards an unknown crisis. It had often made him feel oddly helpless—a dreadful sensation to a man of his nature—and he was puzzled by a half-crystallised knowledge that their mutual distrust came from something ineradicable and latent in both. And now his cousin appeared to be drawn towards the turmoil like a boat to the gaping heart of a whirlpool.

There had come to him a suspicion which he had first blamed himself for tolerating and then accepted reluctantly. He was sure of some secret understanding between Hester and Eustace; and, while he hardly believed that there was more in it than he actually saw, its possibilities were absolutely hateful to him.

He did not forget that there was no legal bar between his companions; in the eyes of society there would scarce be one of sentiment; but, by the light of the present, he now looked back on the past and he saw it in a mist of suspicion which made

Digitized by Google

everything monstrous. His own passionate love and loyalty had enabled him to bear more than he knew, and now it was turning back on him to make life, as it had been since his godfather's death, an impossibility. When had it begun, this thing that he hated? How deep down into the old days when he trod the land with Matthew had it struck its insidious roots? He could not allow himself to think about it. Underneath his steady quietness there were fires in Aythan that had never had their play, fires of hate and love waiting to be stirred to flame by the touch of life, and they were stirring now. So far he had been guided by others, taken the gift of friendship and protection and lived by it and for it. But it was gone now, and though nothing could poison its remembrance to him, the conditions it had created were destroyed. He was beginning to despise himself for realising too tardily that old things had passed away. He had loved Eustace, admired Eustace, perhaps, too much, and though now he would not tell himself that he did neither, there was that in him which could only be dormant until some definite word should make it rise in unquenchable antagonism.

But to-day it was as though trouble had lost its power; his mind refused to meet it, would not dwell on what confronted him as surely as ever this evening. He did not know and did not seek to know what spirit was on him; enough for him as he came whistling down the hill that it was good to live and breathe.

He struck into the fields and made homewards, swinging himself over the stiles; the evening primroses had opened by the house as he drew close to

Digitized by Google

the garden terrace of Crishowell and a corncrake rasped upon the stillness, its harsh voice softened by the deep grass in which it lurked.

As he came round the wall there was a murmur of speech on its inner side; but, in his pervading sense of detachment, he made no sign of his approach, turning its angle and breasting the rise towards the fir-trees, his steps muffled, even as the corncrake's persistent voice, among the rich summer growth underfoot.

The wall diminished in height as the slope rose to the house, and, from where he moved among the scattered trees, he could look on to the green turf and gravelled paths inside it. The terrace was deep, hiding the lower walls from the windows, and at its farther end Eustace and Hester were sitting on a bench. He stopped, his shoulder against a trunk; for, though his mind was far from the two before him, the feminine figure made him pause to draw the half-conscious comparison most of us make, when, fresh from the sight of some new and stirring personality, we encounter a familiar one.

Eustace's face was from him, and his arm lay along the back of the bench, the hand almost touching his companion's sleeve. She was a woman who seldom leaned upon anything and she sat upright, looking before her stiffly. Distance, which will swallow up detail, has no rival to its power of revealing the larger aspects, the inner trend of what we see; the painter stepping back from his canvas, the man who stands fifty yards from the horse whose paces he is judging, act on one of the soundest principles in the world; but Aythan, to whose head the wine of youth had temporarily

Digitized by Google

gone, saw nothing of what would have been patent to the veriest dullard who might chance to be beside him.

The tension of Hester's stillness seemed to cut her out from her background. She rose, without looking at the man beside her, and came along the walk, her eyes on the gravel at her feet. A blue, light scarf she had been wearing hung over the seat, and Eustace followed, bringing it and trailing the fringed ends carelessly on the stones. When she turned to ascend the short flight of steps sunk in the bank to the upper garden he overtook her and laid the fragile thing about her shoulders. He stood a little behind her, folding it across her bosom, and his hand lingered, touching her cheek. She drew a step from him and they faced each other, he stooping his head a little. For a moment they were as still as people in a picture. Then she was in his arms.

Such an unlooked-for development of the every-day spectacle woke Aythan out of his musings and made him spring forward with a dismayed sense of his hateful position. The idea of spying upon the two before him was intolerable, and he cursed his own tactlessness in not having either made some sign of his presence or chosen a different spot in which to indulge his abstraction. That golden cloud of half-realised romance, filling the June evening, fell, in this moment, asunder, and left him face to face with all that was poisoning life. Anger at his own stupidity, unreasoning and unreasonable pain, struck him like arrows and he moved quickly on, not looking where he trod and thinking only of escape from the neighbourhood of the garden that

Digitized by Google

held the secret love affair between its walls. It was his additional misfortune that he put his foot on a piece of crisp, dead wood lying in the grass below the trees, making it crack loudly in two; and, at the sound, Eustace, who now faced in his direction not fifteen yards distant, raised his head and looked over the wall to the slope.

Aythan glanced back as he went, in the vain hope of finding himself unheard, and met the gaze of his eyes above the curls piled on Hester's head, which rested on her lover's shoulder. He could do nothing but hurry on faster. To an onlooker he might have suggested a detected eavesdropper in full flight, and the knowledge of it drove him forward as though the abominable part were his in reality.

The house seemed to stifle him as he entered, but he went up to his room and threw himself, face downwards, on the bed to think, burying his head on his folded arms. He had pulled off his coat and waistcoat and the shirt on his wide shoulders made a great patch of white in the dusk of the little room. He was weary, weary; the foreboding of coming crisis, inevitable and near, was on him.

It was characteristic of him that his luck, turned from good to ill by a shying horse, hardly ever occupied his thoughts; for, like the girl he had met that day in the green tapestry of Benny Bowen's currant bushes, he took himself simply, and, since Matthew's death, had brought the same clear energy and interest to his work, undimmed by any shadow but the one shadow of his own personal loss. What most people would call the practical side of it he had completely ignored, thrusting it away as a

Digitized by Google

sound-hearted man would put the thought of some unsuccessful contest, honestly lost, from him. He merely did not understand Hester's mind. But he would have been the first to maintain her position as one of literal integrity.

He could not think of himself as leaving Crishowell; but though, even now, his mind was scarcely made up, he knew, somewhere in the background of his consciousness, that the break must come. What he did not realise was that for nearly two years he had lived, not with the man and woman who were moving farther than ever from him, but with a memory. And fate knew that, at twenty-five, there is no human being—certainly no male one—whose life can be bound for ever to a memory, no matter how sacred, how noble, how dear; and she was at work, breaking with her stern hand the unnatural bonds that fettered the deep-chested, deep-hearted, deep-voiced piece of manhood lying on the bed. Being a woman, fate must have found it an interesting job to temper with Aythan Waring. There were the makings of an attractive occupation in it for anything feminine.

The dusk grew outside the little window, full of the rush of settling starlings, and pin-points of stars were beginning to prick the sky. A bat or two fluttered across the squares of the pane. Aythan had been up at sunrise and had covered many miles since midday; and, as he lay still, his head on his arms, he fell into the heavy sleep of a tired man. No one had seen him come in, and Hester, oblivious of all but Eustace's encircling touch, had not heard his tread upon the fallen branch while she stood at the foot of the terrace steps, lost as

Digitized by Google

she was in the first moment of real rapture she had ever known.

It was nearly one o'clock when he woke to find everything still, for the household kept early hours at both ends of the night. He struck a light and sat on the edge of his bed, and, as he looked down at the high boots he still wore, the events of the past hours came rushing on him like pigeons flying home to roost. Dominant over all was Barbara; Barbara with a glory of sun playing among the brown tendrils on the back of her neck. But, as he gave himself up to the thought of her, there rose the recollection of Eustace's face, and, piece by piece, the ending to the day came back.

He sprang up, hot with the suspicion of what he instinctively felt his cousin had been thinking of him, and stood in the middle of the room looking at the clock on the mantelpiece whose hands were travelling half-way between one and two. He did not care what time it was; Eustace should hear what he had to say were it the vigil of the Day of Judgment. He went out as quietly as he could and crossed the passage to the bedroom which they had slept in as boys and which his cousin still inhabited. The door was open and it was dark and empty. As he went down-stairs he saw a narrow bar of light shining on the threshold of the study.

Eustace was sitting at the writing-table sorting letters which lay in a box before him; he did not turn as his cousin entered. Aythan went up to the empty hearth and stood on the rug in his dusty boots and breeches and his white shirt. His hair, generally so neat and so close to his head, was tossed and tumbled from the pillow. The room

Digitized by Google

was still while his cousin went on turning over his papers. Presently Eustace looked round.

"By gad!" he exclaimed; "what in the name of heaven have you been doing?"

Aythan stood silent a moment.

"Eustace," he said, "I want to tell you that when I was dawdling under the trees I had not the smallest notion of what was happening."

The man he addressed crossed his arms on the back of his chair and rested his chin on them, looking up with a half-smile in his eyes.

"I was not even thinking of you," Aythan continued; "and it served me right for wool-gathering that I should have seen—seen what I had no business to. I am very sorry, Eustace. I could not help it. It was by accident and nothing else that I was just there, under those trees."

"My dear fellow," said the other, "it is quite immaterial to me where you are, if you will only believe it; Rome, or Charing Cross, or Hell, or Jericho—I have no choice."

There was indescribable suspicion and impertinence in his expression.

"You know perfectly well that what I say is true," said Aythan, his brows drawing into a line.

"You look rather like a prize-fighter," observed Eustace; "you very often do. But there is no need to glare at me like that. I don't want to quarrel with you."

"You will have to, whether you want it or not, if you keep up that tone."

Aythan's hands were clenched and his lips shook; the inflexions of his companion's voice were rousing his blood. In his heart there surged the remem-

Digitized by Google

brance of their tie, almost that of brotherhood. It was loosening, he knew, but even while he saw that as inevitable, disgusted and sore as he was that Eustace should thus bear himself towards him, he hated the band to lessen in anything but peace. For less than what his cousin's manner conveyed he would have struck any other man.

"You understand me perfectly," he said; "though you may like to trifle. But you shall not trifle in anything that concerns Mrs. Bridges. I don't suppose she saw me, and if you have not told her already I can leave this place without her knowing I was anywhere near you to-day."

For a short time neither spoke, and Eustace turned a little paler.

"I am going to marry Hester," he said at last.

The other made no reply; his fingers were mechanically turning some small ornament on the mantelpiece.

"Have you any objection?" asked his companion at last, with a faintly derisive accent.

"None," said Aythan, the temper he had held down rising again. "I am only surprised that she has n't."

Eustace opened his mouth to reply, but before he could do so the other spoke.

"Who am I that I should care?" he said; "it has nothing to do with me. It can make no difference to me, for it has been in my mind some time to leave Crishowell and I am going to tell Mrs. Bridges so. The idea is not new."

Eustace was silent again, and the remnant of levity in his eyes faded.

"Why are you going to do this?" he asked.

Digitized by Google

"It suits me," said Aythan simply. "Besides, when you are married you will probably like to manage the place yourself."

Eustace seldom beat about bushes; not that he had anything against the process, but because audacity fascinated his humour at all times.

"It will not suit me," he said. "It is just now that you should stay."

He looked at the young man on the hearth with a veiled effrontery. "It will make it very difficult for us," he went on. "It would not be a possible position. Hester cannot live on here alone with a man she is engaged to."

"You can very well mend that by going away yourself."

"But I had rather not," rejoined Eustace; "and if I stayed some old tabby of an aunt would have to come. I could not endure that."

"Whether I 'm here or not you ought to go, in the circumstances."

"It may be some time before we marry,, and no one need know anything about it," said Eustace. "It is no one's business; not even yours."

"Then you mean to keep it secret?" exclaimed the other; "and you want me to stay and hold the candle?"

"Sh—sh—don't shout. You will wake the house."

"But what 's the use of all this hiding?" cried Aythan. "Why don't you go away and announce it and then come back and marry?"

"Is n't it rather soon?" said Eustace, tilting his chair and half closing his eyes. "Is n't there some complimentary idea about respect for—for——"

Aythan took a step towards him, and at that

Digitized by Google

moment the door opened and Hester stood in the doorway, a light in her hand, looking from one to the other.

"I cannot go to bed," she said; "you are talking so loud. What is the matter?"

Aythan's dress and the rage in his face startled her and her heart gave a throb of apprehension. Her voice scarcely shook, but Eustace knew that she had been in an agony of nervousness.

"What can be the matter?" she asked again, as neither man spoke.

A white wrapper fell round her to her feet, and in the shine of the candle her fine skin looked like wax. She had not undone her hair, and a necklace of wrought seed pearls she had worn all the evening appeared where the folds of her falling muslin collar turned back. She must have been sitting up late in her room, for she had evidently put off nothing but her gown.

All at once there came on Aythan a wave of distrust of Eustace. Like him he noticed that she was fearfully disturbed; and cold and imposing as Hester appeared standing there, a vision of white and candlelight, he realised that he was going to leave her to certain trouble. He knew that she would suffer, and there was a look to-night in her hard eyes that hinted she feared suffering vaguely. It seemed dreadful that so much pain lay in Eustace's hand to give. He forgot that she was a woman he had never liked and who had never liked him, and he only remembered she was a woman condemned to love Eustace. It was borne in upon him that he would not care to trust a dog to his cousin.

Digitized by Google

A passion of protection that lies in the very strong rose as he saw her, and the secrecy that commended itself to her lover commended itself less than ever to him. He felt that, by keeping his own knowledge of the position from her, he was withdrawing a safeguard, and he repented of what he had said a few minutes before. He had meant to spare her the embarrassment of knowing how he had come by the truth, but Eustace's attitude made him determined to change his mind. It would be better to keep a certain hold on him; he would be furious, perhaps, but for that he did not care two straws.

"Don't be alarmed," said Eustace, as he got up; "there is nothing wrong. Aythan has had an interesting day and he grew excited in talking about it. I suppose we were shouting horribly."

But Hester was not reassured. "You are keeping something from me," she said; "I know there is something the matter."

She put her candle down and clasped her hands, as though the action steadied her.

"Perhaps I had better tell you what I have been telling him," said Aythan. "I know that you and he are engaged."

Hester looked round at her lover.

"It is not I who have spoken," said he; "you need not think that."

"I chanced to pass the garden this evening," broke in the young man; "I saw you talking there and I could not help understanding how things were. I have been telling him so. You may trust me to hold my tongue if you wish it; but I know."

His eyes met Eustace's as he ended his sentence.

"Go to bed, Hester," said the other; "you are

Digitized by Google

only upsetting yourself for nothing. What can it signify whether he knows or not? No one can come between us."

"And I have no wish to come between you, Mrs. Bridges," said Aythan gently. "I hope with all my heart that you will be very happy."

She turned, taking up her candle.

"You are very kind," she said. "Good-night."

Eustace closed the door after her.

"What the devil did you mean by that?" he asked, leaning his back against it and still holding the handle. His eyes blazed.

"I shall tell her to-morrow that I mean to leave," said Aythan. "Come, get out of the way, I am going to bed now. God knows what hour it is."

The other stood where he was. "You infernal idiot!" he exclaimed.

"Get out of my way," said Aythan again.

And, as Eustace did not move, he took him suddenly by the shoulders and sent him spinning against the wall.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VIII

EUSTACE'S MEDITATIONS

EUSTACE recovered his balance and stood listening to his cousin as he felt his way up-stairs between the dark walls; not since their boyhood had either laid violent hands upon the other. He was anything but a coward and he longed sorely to follow and make Aythan repent of the way he had handled him, even while doubting his own ability to do so. But to raise a disturbance in the house at such an hour would be ridiculous, so he went to bed, telling himself that he would have it out with Aythan in the morning. If Aythan was going, and he knew him well enough to be sure that he had made no idle threat, a suitable companion must be found for Hester, were he to remain where he was himself; for, if the time had really come to settle irrevocably, he was determined that no word of slander should impair the position he meant his wife to take. Once Aythan had left it would be difficult to dangle idly on without incurring the comment of the neighbourhood, and he must either look seriously for occupation or rob himself and her of some of the dignity with which he intended to start married life. There would be comment enough when their

Digitized by Google

engagement was public property; but, even should it be adverse, in his comfortable leisure and improved position he would address himself to living it down. No, he would say nothing to Aythan, but he would see that Hester dismissed him, and he would send a note to her in the early morning which should forestall him and give her the chance of taking the initiative. He could not doubt that she would take it.

They had had little time to make any plans for the future, because the first definite words of love spoken by him had been spoken in the garden not eight hours earlier. He had told Aythan that it might be some time before the marriage took place, but, as he said so, he knew that the only reason for delay would be his own reluctance to tie himself to a woman he merely liked. An impulse, born of proximity, and a certain charm he had taught himself to see in Hester had driven him that evening on the terrace. He had not meant to propose to her when they strolled out together, neither had he actually done so; but he had made a tacit declaration of love and she had accepted it eagerly. Aythan's unsuspected presence had been the most ill-timed thing in the world. Even in the study, when he said to him: "I am going to marry Hester," he had hardly felt himself tied, and he had only been irretrievably lost when Aythan told her the truth. He cursed him heartily. And then, with his usual philosophy, he admitted that, after all, the thing was only what he had intermittently played for ever since Matthew's death. All the same, he would suggest to her that they should wait six months before taking the public into their

Digitized by Google

confidence; for Aythan, he knew, would hold his tongue as long as she bade him.

And with that admission he composed himself to sleep, fearing that he might not wake early enough to send his message to Hester before she left her room.

Breakfast was a silent meal next morning. Hester said little, and, when she rose, Aythan, who sat nearest to the door, held it open for her.

"I should like to speak to you for a few minutes," she said to him as she passed out.

Eustace, left alone with the coffee-cups, opened the window and vaulted lightly into the garden. The standard roses flanking the sides of the house were blood-red, and the fresh day was sweet with their breath; the measured swish of a scythe working not far off had almost the effect of being one with the scent, so much did summer's personality seem to be expressed by everything manifest to the senses. Discretion told him that it would be well to keep away from the place; so, as he had a good deal to turn over in his mind, he strolled through the fields down towards the village, his hands deep in his breeches pockets and the level sun striking on his hair and flashing on the buttons of his blue tail-coat.

There was no special purpose in his walk, and when he reached a stile half-way down to the hamlet he lingered with his back to it, looking up at Crishowell House. But, having no hat, he was soon driven from the spot by the sun, and he sat down on the grass-covered roots of an ancient elm standing a little way from the path on the hither side of the wooden rails.

Digitized by Google

He wondered what was going on between those two inside the walls he had just left. He had had no opportunity for a word with Hester, but he gathered from her face that she would act on his suggestion. He knew there had never been peace—real peace—between her and Aythan, though he could not remember ever having heard a bitter or hasty word pass from one to the other; and he believed that she had only asked him to stay on in order to make his own presence possible. It was not a disagreeable reflection.

His eyes wandered up to the lane that divided the fields from the house and wound upward in a stony curve from "The White Cow." He had always thought it a detestable approach to a gentleman's place, ending as it did in the great farm-gate not twenty yards from the doorstep. He would have all that put right in time. They would get a good working man to replace Aythan, and he would superintend him himself, for there would be much to improve and alter, according to his mind. That Hester would see with his eyes was a certainty he never troubled himself to doubt; for he had a confidence in himself, hardly personal enough to be called conceit, and one of the first factors in success. And where she was concerned, experience warranted it.

While his thoughts held him a figure was making its way up from the houses below, treading heavily in the narrow path through the hay. The round discs of the ox-eyes brushed the skirts of the advancing woman as she laid a hand on the stile, and she seemed too much absorbed as she crossed it to notice Eustace sitting under his tree and looking at her silently. He watched her as an idle

Digitized by Google

man watches a child at play in the gutter. Yet there was nothing childish in her aspect, nothing puerile in a frame which might have been created, as the great Greek tragic figures were created, to voice and embody some elemental force.

"Well, Moll!" he said, raising his hand in salutation.

She made a curtsey which brought a twitch to his lips, so grotesque was its travesty of the school-child. From his point of view, as he lounged among the tree-roots, he saw her from the knee upward against the sky-line, with the long heave of the Black Mountain rolling back behind her above the swell of the field.

She waited, uncertain whether to approach. Since the spring day on which they had walked the Llangarth road side by side, a boundless devotion to Eustace Waring had grown until it shadowed everything else in the chaos of her mind. His position as a king among men was, to her, no more disputable than the dominion of the sun in the heavens; she worshipped him, not as a woman worships a man, but with the passionate abstract admiration that humble men will give to the leader of a cause, or the royalty of their land. She was shy, distrusting her kind. In the life of her class an infirmity which has the merest touch of the fantastic is either unforgivable as an attack upon the fitness of things, or is tolerated with the unhidden smile and the plain comment. There were trains of remembrance in Moll that, while they kept her apart from others, created no resentment; passiveness was a habit, only broken by such obvious in-

Digitized by Google

conveniences as the pursuit of her tormentors on market days. She wished no one ill because of a treatment that she had accepted as part of her dimly-comprehended universe; but the mock consideration which Eustace had given her, and which she understood as little as she understood the rest of the world, had lifted her in her own eyes into equality with her neighbours. By his condescension he had done what her be-ribboned hat had done. He had glorified her.

There was much self-respect in Moll, and qualities were tossed about in her character which, in their due arrangement and proportion, might have worked nobly together; for her intellect did not differ from that of many a physically capable woman leading the life of the fields, nor was it wanting; but fate had stepped in capriciously to disjoint the machinery and its adjustment was gone. The great vessel constructed in strength and majesty was derelict on the tide of life.

She had not spoken to him since that memorable market day, seldom seen him; but he had never passed her without a half-ironic movement of greeting, the emphasis of which made her heart swell with pride.

"Hullo, Moll!" he exclaimed again, shading his eyes from the sun as he looked up at her; "where are you going?"

She took a step nearer.

"Lawk, sir," she replied, "I thought, for sure, you'd be at the house."

"Are you going there?" he asked.

She drew a small object from a fold of her coarse

Digitized by Google

field-apron and held it out to him on the palm of her hand.

"Benny Bowen did tell me to bring you this," she explained.

Eustace took the little thing and turned it round in his fingers. It was a small netted purse, a tiny blue and white absurdity with steel rings, containing a couple of silver coins and a halfpenny.

"But what am I to do with it?" he inquired. "To whom does it belong? It is not mine."

She looked puzzled.

"Benny did say I were to give it to Mr. Waring. 'Go you to the house, Moll,' he says. ''T is a frigmajig o' a thing,' says 'e, 'but there be money in it an' back it must go. Mr. Waring will send it.' I 've been mindin' them words all the way up the hill."

"Did he tell you to whom it belonged?"

"I can't mind that," said Moll, frowning.

"But why did he send it to me? Did he say nothing more?"

"'A said you was there yesterday, sir."

"Then I suppose it was my cousin he meant," observed Eustace, after a pause; "but I 'm sure it is not his."

He turned it over again; the intense femininity of the thing was hardly suggestive of Aythan. The woman stood silent while he examined it.

Sometimes Eustace was inspired.

"Moll," said he, laying it on the moss beside him, "go back to Benny's house and say to him: 'Benny, what is the lady's name?' Do you understand? Then come back and tell me. I shall be here waiting till you come."

Digitized by Google

There was curiosity in his face as she disappeared beyond the stile. It struck him as odd that this extremely ladylike toy should have been sent to Aythan. Benny had spoken of "yesterday" to Moll, and his cousin had been absent the whole of the preceding day. Almost for the first time he realized how little he knew about him and how completely he had taken it for granted that there was not much to know. The intensity of his anger against him had somewhat faded to-day, dissipated by the prospect of his departure; and the sun, lying bright upon a landscape which would, in a few months, be practically his own possession, shed a mollifying light on everything. For all that he knew, old Benny Bowen, with his piety and his biblical flowers, might be the promoter of some intrigue kept snug from sight behind the remote innocence of his garden; or Aythan might even be a married man with a family, and the slenderness of the little purse be intended as a wordless reminder to him of his responsibilities! He threw himself back on the moss and laughed. It was an absurd world.

The serio-comic spirit of his imagination soothed him, for, little as he might think it, Aythan's rough grasp of the night before had shaken him, mentally as well as physically. Though leisurely by nature, the whirl of a crisis was not disagreeable to him; but he demanded that it should not take him unawares, and the other had forced his hand.

"Her be Miss Barbara Troup," said Moll's voice. She had stopped before him again with the air of a private soldier who addresses his officer from regulation distance.

Digitized by Google

"Miss Barbara Troup," he repeated slowly, taking up the purse as though he expected to find some corroboration of the name on it. He had heard of the new owner's arrival at Tillestone, and Hester had announced, a couple of months before, that she must call on his daughter when her mourning was over. She had taken her mourning rigidly.

"And was that all Benny said?" he inquired.

"He were laughin'. 'Law!' says 'e, ''a did n't look yesterday as if 'a'd forgot her name so quick!' 'A was mumblin' about a love-charm, too, but I could n't make nothin' o' that. Benny do mumble cruel bad."

"Well," said Eustace, rising, "off you go, and tell him I will send it back to the lady. And here, Moll, here is something for you."

He held out a fourpenny piece. She took it, delighted.

"Well, I never! 'T is a groat," she said.

Her sister, who kept their meagre stock of money, gave her enough for the needs of a market day, but a coin of her own was something unforeseen. It would have represented little more than a momentary pleasure had it come from another hand; as it was, it would be a permanent one. She tied it into her apron.

Eustace rose from the moss and brushed its green from his clothes. If Aythan had stolen a march on him yesterday, their places were, apparently, to be reversed to-day. He laughed aloud at the whimsicality of circumstances; for, while he had been making love in the garden above the fields, the other had been, likely enough, making love in the garden below them. He had heard of Miss Troup

Digitized by Google

as something of a beauty, and he wondered how Aythan had compassed her acquaintance. Though the matter had no real importance to any one, he would have liked to go down and question the simple old man, but last night's scene would make any meddling with his cousin's affairs seem doubly undignified, should Benny betray him. It was not to be thought of. He longed to share his discovery with Hester, if only because it amused him so much. Aythan with a love affair—one of the serious kind, fraught with legitimate consequences—struck him as absurdly incongruous. It is strange that, in all the years of the world's existence, among all the facts that men and women have learned about their own sex, the one thing they have never gained is a knowledge of which of its members is likely to please those of the opposite sex.

He found Hester in the linen-room at the top of the house. It was cut off from the passage and he entered, closing the door behind him. The light from a skylight fell upon the white piles of stuff, and her fresh cheek looked no less fresh for the snowy background.

"Well?" he said.

"He is going."

There was a silence as she pushed a roll of damask into its place. Her domestic setting did not detract from a charm composed so much of outward dignity. She wore several sparkling rings and they flashed in the shadow of the cupboard.

"I shall be very glad when he is gone," she said, dropping her arms.

"The sooner the better, of course," replied

Digitized by Google

Eustace, meditatively. "In some ways it may be inconvenient——"

"I fancy he will go as soon as he can—perhaps to-morrow," she interrupted. "I told him I needed him no longer. There was no reason to say more, was there?"

"None."

She turned back to the shelves. It was no sympathy with Aythan that showed Eustace in a sudden gleam her absolute remorselessness, but, because he took things so much more lightly than she could ever take them, it roused in him a momentary horror. The same feeling might beset one who, turning a corner, meets a funeral.

Then he put his hand in his pocket and drew out the little purse. When he had told her its history she laughed contemptuously.

"Tush!" she exclaimed; "you make everything out of nothing, Eustace. Old Bowen knew that to send it here was the only means of having it honestly delivered."

"Aythan was away all yesterday, and part of the time he was at Benny's with her. Benny was laughing, and he told Moll it was surprising that Aythan had forgotten her name. There was some nonsense about a love-charm, too."

Hester became paler.

"If there is anything serious in it he will not go far," she said.

A devouring anxiety to be free, to be alone with the man she loved, to be quit of all that Aythan had stood for in her life, was consuming her like a flame.

Digitized by Google

"Will you take care of it?" said he, offering the purse to her.

She glanced at it almost with dislike.

"Lock it up," she said. "The writing-table in the drawing-room will be a good place."

He turned to go, and his hand was on the latch when he met her look. He stepped back and kissed her.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IX

RICHARD'S BARN

THE building known as Richard's Barn stood at the corner of an insignificant meadow, just where agriculture ceased and mountain land began. At this time of the year it was so girt about with hedges and greenery that its presence was scarcely observable to a stranger till he came close upon it.

Its ecclesiastical look had given it a reputation which, possibly, it did not deserve, namely, that of having been a chapel; for the country folk were strong on this point, though only interested in antiquities so far as they would bear out the words of their grandparents. It was a roomy barn, the unceiled roof of which was supported by heavy oak rafters dulled in colour by the dust that a couple of generations of threshers had raised in their efforts. On its west wall could be seen the outline of a bricked-up lancet window; and the observer's eye, once used to the dusk of the place, might distinguish elaborate curves and trefoils in the dimness above his head. One end was railed off for the housing of calves. It was a spot to suggest to a reflective mind the background of the star-haunted drama of Bethlehem.

The door stood wide as Eustace Waring neared

Digitized by Google

the place one afternoon a few weeks later, and some twenty men and about half-a-dozen young women were loitering round it, looking expectant, or sheepish, or merely stolid, as their respective natures decreed. The women were grouped severely together, after the fashion of rusticity when anything uncommon is toward, and one or two of the men carried small rolls of paper. This assemblage was the choir of Crishowell church, and the practice for which they were met together was being held, according to bi-weekly custom, in Richard's Barn, out of deference to those hill people who lived at a distance from their place of worship.

That dominating love of the land which leavened Aythan's whole character had scarcely touched his cousin, though both had grown up in the same environment; and the only thing that had ever drawn Eustace towards the life of the people round him was the passion for music which he shared with them. His own voice was not remarkable, and a knowledge, both intuitive and acquired, of the construction and rendering of music was his most adequate expression of the melody that was in him. He often envied Aythan the rich and vibrant baritone that he had never cultivated at all.

He had just returned to Crishowell House. After Aythan had gone he had taken himself decorously from Hester's vicinity until the companion, whom both recognised as the sop due to public sensitiveness, should be installed; now he had come back to find a needy gentlewoman of debatable age in occupation. As he came into sight the choir performed the feat of being simultaneously depressed as units and elated as a body.

Digitized by Google

Eustace had conducted their practices often enough in the past; and when, as now, they were to take part in one of those choir competitions beloved by Wales and its borders, he never neglected their interests; twice he had raised them to honourable mention, once even to victory. He cut a sapling from the hedge and began whittling it down to the size of a bâton.

The little company shuffled into the barn and stood in a circle, grouped in the order of their singing; the women moistened their lips and became self-conscious, the men cleared their throats, and Eustace, drawing forward an empty trough from the shadow, turned it upside down with his toe and stood upon it.

"'Er won't rowl over wi' ye, sir?" hazarded a pale, small man who sang a thunderous bass.

Eustace shook his head.

"We had better begin with something we know well," said he; "the Old Hundredth will do; stand closer to me, young Tom Evans. You are apt to make time and I want you under my own ear. Now then!"

He raised the sapling, and, as the first notes of the ancient tune rose under the dusty rafters, the dreamy intoxication of sound ran into his face.

The voices surged up in their measured swell, carrying him with them into a world where self, self-interest, and all that clogged his versatile spirit were left far below. As the strain heaved to and fro and the strong notes of the men lifted it from bar to bar and from cadence to cadence, the figure of well-appointed, egotistical young manhood standing with raised hands in the vortex of its tumult

Digitized by Google

seemed to have grown subordinate to its surroundings, to have become a mere vehicle through which the intangible soul of music was pouring into the rough shepherds and ploughmen. The light from the wide-set door struck full on him as he faced it on the homely eminence of the inverted trough; once or twice he turned on young Tom Evans and seemed to be holding back the rebellious voice with the weight of the thin sapling; now a singer, meeting his eye, would read, without any reason but that of a sudden, compelling certainty, the message that it conveyed to himself and restrain or accelerate the note as it left his throat; but Eustace Waring was gone, and in his place an impersonal likeness of him rose above the crest of the wave in that sea of sound.

When the last syllable had dropped into silence the choir had become like a bather seasoned to the water by the first dip, and a rustling of books and talk preceded the real business for which they had come together; Eustace remained where he was; his eyes shone, and, when the girls stood forward to go through their parts in the more complicated music, they forgot to be affected by a personality which they instinctively knew had ceased to regard them from any human standpoint. The men sat down on a couple of long benches ranged by the wall, and, while they watched the women, certain whispers and nudges proclaimed the reaction produced by their escape from the dominating hand and eye.

As the afternoon wore on, the barn doorway, which looked almost due southwards, was throwing its brilliant square of light slantwise on the floor.

Digitized by Google

The whole community, warmed to its work, went through the music together for the second time and had reached a zenith of interest that welded it into a consistent whole. To Eustace time was not; whether he had stood an hour or a moment in that circle of elementary humanity he neither knew nor cared.

During the last chorus he had been dimly conscious that a female figure had entered the building and sat down on a box at its farther end, where the railed partition shut off the empty space for the calves. Whoever the woman might be she had been so still that her presence was practically forgotten by every one; and when the business of the meeting was over and Eustace stepped down from the trough and threw his bâton into the sunlight outside, no movement reminded him of the stranger's existence.

"Well now, we 'ave n't 'ad 'Old Land o' my Fathers,'" remarked an elderly, rubicund Herefordshire man whose voice, though on the wane, was still to be reckoned with. "Oi'd ha' thought, sure enough, the Welshmen 'ere would n't ha' let us go without that."

"'T is a fine, swingin' tune too," observed another.

"Come on then!" exclaimed Eustace. "By all means let us have it. The only difficulty is that half of you will sing it in Welsh and half in English."

The choir smiled collectively.

"Indeed to goodness, we that have the knowledge o' two langwidges must consider them that have only one," said a twinkling-eyed Welshman, wagging his head.

The girl sitting in her corner held her breath as the wings of that great national melody swept round

Digitized by Google

her. She knew it, as most people do whose steps take them anywhere near Wales, but she had never heard it rise from the lungs of the men of the border soil. As the bars mounted to the first sustained high note and then rolled down she clasped her hands one over the other, and it seemed as if her being trembled and was swung, unresisting, through the dim spaces among the rafters.

Up went the voices again, flung into the vibrating air from the throats of the rough gathering that closed, ever nearer, round Eustace as the custom-bound souls struggled for expression. Not one of the singers had much consciousness of possessing a soul at all, except when the parson alluded to it from the pulpit as a precariously-placed article; but what suspicion they had of anything beyond daily needs and the instincts that bound them to their kind clamoured now, in uncomprehended aspiration, as they sang. It was but a lower degree of what possessed their conductor; the buried root of the thing that flowered in him.

The tears welled up in Barbara's eyes, drawn by the unseen forces rocking round her; by the sound that echoed, like the cry of a national, territorial spirit blown on swaying winds among the mountain-tops; and her own pulses seemed as though beating beside a beating heart that was the heart of Time, Life, Melody, and Death in one—Death, the following shade, that in all moments of compelling delight or expansion makes us conscious of his watching face.

Barbara did not think herself a person of more than ordinary imagination, nor was she musical, in the active and practical sense, but the spell kept her

Digitized by Google

motionless while the little crowd dispersed. As Eustace, turning to take up his hat from the bench on which he had laid it, became aware of her presence, she rose quickly to go, struck by the plain fact that she had no business to be in the barn.

For once in his life he was somewhat taken aback; for he had hardly expected the vague individual, who had slipped in so quietly behind the sheltering circle of men, to turn into a woman of his own class; a woman whose rich curves and coloring stood out like those of a blossoming plant, in the dusty darkness from which she emerged. She wore a green riding-habit, high waisted, as was the fashion of the day, with a short coat, and a soft white stock was swathed round her throat. Her eyes were still brilliant with the tears whose fall she had checked, and the blood was flushing to her face as he moved towards her.

"I must apologise, sir," she began hurriedly. "I know I have no right to be here, but I heard the singing as I came down the hill. It was really——"

"Please, pray do not say that!" broke in Eustace.

"Yes; but it was most intrusive, and I am glad you do not mind. I really don't think I disturbed them, for they did not notice me, I am sure."

"It would have made them sing all the better if they had," he replied. "It was kind of you to be interested. For myself, I honestly want an outside opinion. Did it seem to you to be good?"

The blood ran to her cheek again.

"I thought it beautiful," she answered simply.

Eustace's eyes lit up; for what he read in her

Digitized by Google

face told him something of the power that had been let loose at his bidding. His phase of impersonality had passed with its final reverberations. He could see she had been strongly stirred—almost upset. He had urged Hester to come and listen to the practice; and he thought now with satisfaction of the chance visitor who had intervened. He did not want Hester. In her letters she had made no mention of the little purse which, he guessed, was lying forgotten in the writing-table drawer; his suspicion that it belonged to the girl beside him grew every minute. He had contrived to find out more about her and he knew that her visit to Benny had been made on horseback.

"I think you are Miss Troup," he said.

She assented.

"You will forgive me for asking," he went on. "The reason I do so is that, not long ago, a netted purse was brought to me and I found out that it belonged to you. It is unpardonable of us not to have returned it all this time, but I have been away and I am afraid Mrs. Bridges must have forgotten it in my absence."

"Oh, but it does not matter in the least," broke in Barbara.

"It is locked up," continued Eustace; "she has intended for some time to call on you at Tillestone, and I suppose she has meant to bring it with her. But I am forgetting that you may not know of whom I am speaking. Mrs. Bridges lives at Crishowell House. She is a connection of mine. My own name is Waring."

The interest which this news brought into his companion's face was not lost on the young man.

Digitized by Google

For a moment she seemed to struggle for something suitable to reply.

"That will be very kind of her," she said at last, as she moved to the door. "I was afraid I had lost the purse on the mountain and I never expected to see it again. There is only sevenpence in it," she added, with a little laugh. "The loss would not have ruined me."

"It was picked up by an old man just outside his garden," said Eustace. He did not wish to be more explicit, for he was anxious to see how much she would tell him.

If Barbara had been a little older Aythan's name would have had no terrors for her; but because she had thought of him often she was the more inclined to prove to the world how completely she had forgotten his existence. Nevertheless, as the possibility that he had mentioned her to Eustace struck her she saw the trap that her silence was laying, though she knew not that her companion was watching it, like a poacher watching a rabbit-snare. She could be subtle too.

"You must mean Benny Bowen," she said, looking him squarely in the face; "he is an old gardener of my father's. I think the gentleman who came to see him while I was in his garden must have been your brother, for I heard his name."

"No, that was my cousin, Aythan," replied he.

He was pleased. She could not have gone far into the subject, he thought.

"I tied my pony to a gate over there," said she, pointing with her whip as they came out into the sun; "and I meant to have slipped away quietly before the practising was finished."

Digitized by Google

"I am very glad you did not," replied he.

The black pony thought very ill of the long and lonely meditations to which Barbara would condemn him in her rides. So many things appealed to her in this Welsh borderland; its traditions, homely yet grim, its solitary spaces of mountain, its ancient farms with their dark, sly-looking windows, its half-forgotten chapels, all made for her a hunting-ground of which she felt she could never tire. The spirit of place drew her mightily. She had promised herself that no foot of ground, no grass-choked bridle-road, should be sacred from her till she had learned every cranny and corner of hill and valley. She would listen eagerly while some bedridden beldame or aged shepherd poured into her ears the generally grisly legends of his or her illiterate youth. The hillsides, the eerie dingles, down which the whimpering water trickled to the lower levels, were, to her, thick with mystery and allurement. The reaction from the cloying prettiness of what might be called her father's Watteau cast of mind had driven her with an unconscious relief towards the things of the soil. Thus it came about that the black pony spent many a weary half-hour with his head made fast to the most convenient solid object within reach while she peered into churches, explored coppices, or loitered, reading fragments of local biography on table-topped tombstones.

He had pawed a very respectable cavern in the earth by the time his owner approached, gyrated in as many directions as the length of his rein would permit, and scraped the flap of the saddle on the gate-post.

Digitized by Google

"I shall do myself the pleasure of calling at Tillestone with Mrs. Bridges, if I may," said Eustace, as she sat gathering up her reins. "And perhaps, when they know their parts better, you would come and listen to the choir again?"

"Oh, thank you. I should like to do that."

A sudden longing rose in the girl's breast to hear something of Aythan. This man, who lived under the same roof, and who, no doubt, had been with him only a few hours earlier, had scarcely mentioned his name though he knew of their meeting at Benny's. Barbara always felt bold on horseback.

"Will you please tell your cousin that I got home safely after being at Benny Bowen's," she said. "He seemed afraid I should come across tipsy people going back from Crishowell feast."

She did not know whether her companion had heard of Aythan's escort or not, but the words were suited to either case.

"I would, with pleasure," rejoined Eustace; "but he has left Crishowell for good."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER X

THE MAN WITH THE SHABBY COAT

AYTHAN had not delayed his departure from Crishowell House one hour longer than was necessary. His efforts to assure Hester of his good faith had produced no effect; and, keenly as he wished to make her understand how little he desired to come between her and her lover, he had not succeeded. She would not understand because she did not care to do so, and her manner, even more than her words, when she dismissed him, had made that fact plain; her knowledge of the moral injustice she had done both him and Matthew turned her to adamant; for the injurer never forgives the injured.

Eustace had rebuffed him with all the enormous insolence at his command. He felt that each moment spent with them was a humiliation, for he was not weak by nature, and his readiness to accept points of view not his own was no sign in him of vacillation. Behind his responsiveness to the least advance on the part of another was a fierce background of pride.

He went from Hester's presence straight to his room and began, mechanically and without delay, to put together everything of any value, monetary

Digitized by Google

or sentimental, that he had. He collected the estate account-books which stood in a tidy row on a shelf, and emptied the study writing-table drawers of every plan, bill, and paper belonging to his work. These, with a couple of locked dispatch-boxes, he gathered into a corner.

His intimate personal possessions were few, and it did not take him long to lay them and his clothes in the leathern valises which he dragged from under the bed. He worked on, allowing himself no time to think, and, when he had finished up-stairs, he went down to collect his fishing-rods and guns, his few books, and the odd whips and game-bags which belonged to him, from various places about the house. Then he went out to the stable to have his own cob made ready.

The man who came out of the harness-room laid the saddle he generally used, one belonging to the place, on the animal's back, but he took it off, bidding him fetch an old one of his own that he had not ridden in for years. When this was done he left the horse on the pillar-rein and went into the house to find Hester. The groom looked after him, open-mouthed; he felt certain that something was wrong. Aythan entered the sitting-room, hat in hand, his riding-whip under his arm, and stood before her.

"I have left everything in order," said he; "the account-books and all the business papers are together in my room. As I pass 'The Cow' I will send up a man with a cart to fetch my things; they are all in my room, too, and Emma will see them out of it. I will send you my address from Hereford, so that you will know where to find me if

Digitized by Google

there 's any difficulty about the place. Everything is paid up to last month. Good-bye."

Hester was really taken aback for a moment. Then, gathering herself together, she stood up.

"Good-bye," she said.

As her hand lay in his the feeling of the night before came back to him. She seemed so much alone.

"Remember," he said, with the first tremor of voice that had taken him that morning, "if trouble comes—if you ever want any one—I am always ready."

But she had recovered herself.

"You are very kind," she said; "but you seem to forget there is Eustace. Good-bye."

He went out to fetch his cob. The man who had saddled him, an old servant, was in the stall, with a rubber thrown over his shoulder. As he watched Aythan mount his heart misgave him.

"What is it, Master Aythan?" he exclaimed. "Surely there 's something wrong?"

"I am not coming back," said Aythan.

The two men clasped hands and the younger rode away down towards "The White Cow."

It was after Crishowell House was hidden from him by the turn of the hill that he let himself realise what had happened. He had seen the landlord of "The Cow," who had promised to send for his belongings within an hour and have them dispatched to join the Hereford coach at Llangarth. He had not allowed himself to think or feel as he made his preparations; but sensation began to come back, now that he had nothing to do but trot between the hedges of the familiar road. All his work and in-

Digitized by Google

terests and the happiness of past years, all old days and boyish friendship, had culminated in this; that he should ride alone down the hill, unregretted, and without a Godspeed from any one but the groom.

He had not tried to see his cousin, for he knew at last that Eustace hated him, and, while this struck him as a piteous and a bitter thing, he knew that he hated Eustace in return. He saw now that they had only contrived to live so long in peace because, since Hester's coming, they had been so much apart. She had driven herself, like a wedge, between them.

As he left the little country town on the Wye behind him the eastern side of the Black Mountain fell away back towards the Golden Valley. Up there lay Tillestone. Though so much had happened in the time, it was not twenty-four hours since he had parted from Barbara, and her every glance and movement were fresh in his mind. He thought of her standing among the larkspurs and rosebushes, of her riding beside him through the squandered gold of the declining sun, of her far-away figure receding into the distant space while he watched, and the pictures he saw obliterated, for a moment, the dull pain at his heart. In all probability she would never hear what had become of him, and, even were she to do so, what could it be to her? Absolutely nothing.

But, supposing—only supposing—that life held some creature—for choice, fashioned in her likeness—to whom it would not be nothing?

Hester Bridges was the only woman of his own world who had ever done more than cross his path to disappear into that dim background of acquaintances which surrounds most human beings, and

Digitized by Google

which has so little influence on them. For the others, and there had been but one or two, he had never thought of looking on them as anything but the episodes they were; and now, with Tillestone up there by the hill, he did not want to remember them at all.

But to suppose was no use, he told himself. He put his cob to a canter, and, hardening his heart, he thrust Barbara behind him into the distance that contained all he had loved so much.

As the shadows lengthened the dull old cathedral city rose before him from its green surroundings. Saved by its non-industrial character from all defilement of smoke or soot, it lay clear among its fields with the river flowing evenly under the bridge by the Castle Green, and on past the square towers he had been looking at for an hour or more as he approached.

He avoided "The Green Dragon," whose sign-board was displayed in the principal street, and betook himself to a smaller inn of which he knew in a less frequented thoroughfare. To-morrow he would hire a boy to look after the cob, call on his banker and the family lawyer, and go into all the business questions whose consideration is made desirable by any new departure, from marriage to contemplated suicide.

Next morning when he woke it seemed to him as though the whole thing had been a dream, and it took him some time to realise the chasm that lay between to-day and yesterday. He had tossed about through the earlier part of the night and fallen asleep when the sparrows began their chattering among the eaves of the inn yard.

Digitized by Google

It is to those in but moderately hard case that night brings counsel. To the poor souls who are desperate, who see their fears taking the shape of fate and standing, gigantic and pitiless, by their pillows, night is a hell, a horror, through which the voice of wisdom cannot pierce. But it is only those with nothing left to fear who know the merciful truth; who understand that, once past that farthest zone of mental pain, the animal in them will reassert itself; that the mind, bereft of everything but the numbness of over-suffering, will be, for a space, subordinate to the body. The man who has reached this point will look forward to his bed—yes, at the ghastly risk of sleeping to dream that all is well; he will cling to its physical comfort as the one thing left to him to cling to; for his spiritual part will have been, temporarily, struck down at its post, and the bodily part, its poor faithful servant, will be standing in the breach.

Aythan was very young, very strong; very much hurt, possibly, but in no desperate case; and, though he had turned and tossed, the night had brought counsel to him. He had been trying to put together some plan of action, and it had not taken him long to decide that idleness would be insupportable. He had sufficient money to do as he pleased, for Matthew's will had secured him a sum large enough for any young man whose taste lay outside cities. He might give himself a season's hunting, or travel abroad if he chose to do so. Both prospects were pleasant; but he determined, should he take either, that in the end he would look for work. In those days, before agricultural colleges and examinations and diplomas had raised their bogey heads to scare

Digitized by Google

young men, he was very likely to get what he wanted; for he had an excellent working knowledge of estate management. Though Crishowell House itself was not important, it stood on a large property, and Aythan had seen a good deal of farming, both on hill and valley. In a quiet way he was known to be something of an authority on sheep; for all his home life had been spent in Matthew's footsteps, and Matthew had been a judge of no common merit. These things were in his mind as he went into the office of Messrs. Stotson and Stotson, his lawyers.

A few months before the death of Bridges, old Stotson had taken his son into partnership, and the latter, a hatchet-faced young man of good presence, greeted Aythan as he entered the room. The two had met once or twice, and Harry Stotson, who was nearly as well acquainted as his father with his clients' affairs, looked upon Matthew's fate as the most ill-timed misfortune possible. Father and son liked Aythan, and the elder man had had a warm friendship with Bridges, independent of business relations.

"What can we do for you, Mr. Waring?" said the young man, as he and Aythan were seated, one at either side of an impressive writing-table.

"I 'm afraid not much," replied Aythan. "The fact is I came to tell your father that I have left Crishowell altogether."

His companion had been too short a time in the business to be absolutely professional, and his astonishment was such that, for a moment, he could say nothing.

"Mrs. Bridges is making new arrangements,"

Digitized by Google

continued Aythan, rather lamely, looking at Stotson, who dropped his eyes immediately.

"And what do you mean to do?" asked the young lawyer at last, drawing lines on a piece of foolscap with his pen.

It did not take the other long to give the outline of his intentions, but Harry Stotson was interested; from what he had heard of him through his father he guessed that it was a hard wrench to Aythan to leave Crishowell, and he did not doubt that there was trouble to be read into the bald statement to which he had listened. He was tactful enough to take the fact for granted, silently.

They sat talking over the respective merits of travel and hunting, and the likelihood of finding such occupation as his client wanted. There was a hint of unspoken sympathy in his companion's attitude which was grateful to Aythan's sore heart; had it been uttered it would have turned him to stone; but, when the bell rang and a clerk brought in a message, he jumped up with an apology, fearful of having trifled with professional time. At the threshold he turned back to ask Stotson to dine with him that afternoon. Stotson desired nothing better.

As he crossed the hall a man was being shown into the room on the opposite side of it, where the senior partner of the firm lurked like a grey-headed spider. He was so shabbily dressed that, in the dim illumination from the fanlight over the front door, he scarcely looked like a gentleman, and Aythan, standing aside to let him pass, noticed the stoop of his thick shoulders and the fringe of white hair on his bullet head. He could not quite dismiss him from his mind as he went up the street,

Digitized by Google

and decided that he must have seen some one like him in another place. He went off to "The Green Dragon" to arrange a dinner for himself and his guest, the table of his own inn being indifferent.

The dining-room in which he sat with Harry Stotson a few hours later was long and low; a spot where leisurely country gentlemen and professional men might discuss their affairs without risk of worse interruption than the attentions of waiters who had grown old with the furniture. The young men were at a little table by the window, and Aythan, facing the room with his back to the street, was interested to see that the shabby-coated individual who had entered the lawyer's house as he left it that morning was sitting alone at its farther end. His features were even less prepossessing than he had supposed, and he ate with the surly aloofness of a dog which has unearthed a bone from some hole only known to himself. He drew his friend's attention to him.

"That is Sir Helbert Bucknall," said the other. "Have you never seen him? He owns property in your direction."

"He never comes near it," replied Aythan. "The only village on it is a nest of bad characters, and the farms below want looking after badly. He hardly looks pleasant."

"He 's an ill-conditioned old devil," said Stotson, who always left what professionalism he had in the office.

"I saw him as I left you this morning, and I thought I knew his face. I could n't think where I had seen him."

"You have only to look over the mantelpiece."

Digitized by Google

Aythan's eyes went to the spot where a signed print of a man's head and shoulders hung in a wooden frame.

"Of course," he said; "I remember now. How often I looked at that picture when I came here with my godfather as a little boy! I used to sit by the fire while he was busy in the town."

"He's not so young as he was then," observed Harry Stotson; "and, from his looks, I should n't think he had improved with age. An old woman out near Clodbury told my father that he would skin a flint and spoil a sixpenny knife by it."

Aythan laughed.

"Well, he does not get much good from Wern village," he said. "The hovels in that place are disgraceful, and the people inside them are not much better. I see and hear a good deal about them where I am—or rather, where I was, I should say."

He sighed involuntarily. "And yet," he added, "how can a man stay away from such a country as that? There's no place like it, Stotson."

As neither host nor guest drank much wine they rose soon after this and strolled together into the Castle Green.

The clocks were striking seven at intervals, which shed little credit on the accuracy of Hereford time, as they parted and went their several ways, Aythan to interview a lad whom he hoped to engage as groom. He reflected that, the cob once provided for, he must settle his own plans and decide where he meant to live until the hunting season should begin, for he had almost made up his mind to stay in England.

It was next day at noon that a note was brought

Digitized by Google

to him from Harry Stotson, asking him, in his father's name, to call at their office. The business was urgent, he added, and he hoped that his client would come at his earliest convenience. Aythan took up his hat and followed the messenger without further delay.

He was received by the senior partner, who informed him that Sir Helbert Bucknall had decided to employ an agent solely for his mountain property, and now offered him the post.

"There was something for, but a good deal more against his acceptance of the offer," said Stotson; "the salary was not great, and he was not even sure whether it was a position a gentleman would care to accept. But, above all things, it necessitated a man who knew the country and the people well, for the most difficult part of the work would lie round Wern village, which Sir Helbert had decided to deal with by the strong hand. The agent must live as near to the place as possible and have the offending hamlet under close observation, for the perpetual thieving of wood that went on must be put down, once and for all.

"If it had not been for my son," continued the lawyer, "I should not have thought of suggesting your name to Sir Helbert, or of making you the offer, and I do not even now pretend to advise you to take it. I only put it before you. Harry is responsible for the suggestion; he gave me no reason, but he said he thought you might accept it, Mr. Aythan. He assured me that I should do wrong if I did not, at least, give you the chance. Blame him, if you blame any one."

Such a storm of conflicting sensations rushed

Digitized by Google

upon Aythan that, for a few moments, he could not tell what he felt. He sat speechless in the leathern chair by Stotson's table.

"You will have to think it over," said the old man; "but if you could do so by to-night it would be a great matter. Sir Helbert is obliged to leave Hereford to-morrow, and, should you see fit to take this offer, there would be time for an interview in the morning before the coach starts."

"Would he want me to begin at once?" inquired Aythan, trying to collect his ideas and to hold back the wave of longing that the thought of the familiar soil was letting loose in his heart.

"Immediately," said Stotson. "My son told me that you had some idea of hunting this winter, but I am afraid you would have to give that up."

The young man sat with his elbows on his knees and looked at the floor. As Stotson said, there was much for it and rather more against it.

"Wern will give you a lot of trouble, I fear," continued his companion; "it will be by no means a nice job. And it's a barren place up there, for all that line of country on the side of the mountain belongs to Sir Helbert, as far as Tillestone."

There was a pause.

"Have you a map?" asked Aythan suddenly.

The lawyer drew a long roll from a tin box and gave it to him. He spread it out on the table and leaned over it a moment.

"I will take it," said he as he straightened himself.

That afternoon he met the junior partner in the street. "You are a deuced good fellow, Stotson," he said.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XI

AYTHAN CROSSES THE RUBICON

In spite of Aythan's quick decision and the fact that he and Sir Helbert Bucknall met and came to terms on the following morning, it was almost a month before he took up his responsibilities. On both sides there remained a good deal to be settled. To discover a place where a gentleman—even a gentleman of the new agent's simple tastes—could be decently lodged was no easy problem; but, at last, its solution was got in an ancient farmhouse just by the western end of the plateau at the mountain's foot, and the farmer's wife agreed to cook for him and to keep his two rooms in order.

It was a couple of days after Barbara's meeting with Eustace at Richard's Barn that Aythan found himself on the back of his cob, retracing his steps towards a spot not four miles from Crishowell House. It was the very last thing he had expected to happen; and he had detachment enough to admire grimly the ironic anti-climax to his own departure.

He was glad, in spite of this half-defiant attitude towards fate, that the medley of fields, hedges, and coverts, with the undulations of a broken country and its differing levels, would prevent his seeing the familiar roof from any point near the place

Digitized by Google

where he was to pitch his tent, though he would look down upon it, often, in his comings and goings; and from the height by Wern village gaze across the wide cleft threaded by the Digedi brook straight upon its western face. He wondered how long it would be before he should meet his cousin; it was not impossible that he would never do so, for the mountain had no attraction for Eustace, and Sir Helbert's two farms immediately below Wern were the only places owned by him that did not stand a good hundred feet above Crishowell.

The part of his duty that would set him as a kind of thief-catcher over the Green Jiner and his like commended itself to him very little, and, the more he thought of it, the less it pleased him. But it was his predecessor's opinion that the hamlet, if better looked after, would be a better place, and he hoped, by his presence so near it, and by certain reforms that he meant to suggest to Sir Helbert as being in the landlord's interests, to bring about a better state of things. Of his new employer's generosity he expected little.

He wondered, while he rode along, if he had been a fool to turn back, as he had done, on his own tracks; whether he had allowed that mastering love of the soil and its people to shoulder away commonsense. But, though there was not much that Aythan feared, he had not courage to go far into the subject; for it was no love either of soil or people that had drawn him; it was a name written on a map, and he knew it.

There were two ways of reaching his destination. One was by the ordinary Llangarth turnpike and the other by a road which diverged from it before

Digitized by Google

reaching that town and ran in ascending levels to the mountain, past Tillestone, to debouch on the plateau for the farther end of which he was bound. He had no hesitation as to which he would take.

He pushed on, making what pace he could, for he did not want to arrive after dark and he meant to go as slowly as possible past Tillestone. As its chimneys rose before him he got off and walked beside the cob, drawing the rein over his arm. The yew-bordered garden of the Court was so close to the road that a passer-by was within speaking distance of any one who might be in it, but he saw, with a pang of disappointment, that it was empty. There was no sign of life about the place except the smoke mounting from the chimney-stacks, and a small dog which barked vehemently from the back regions. It was hard to think that Barbara was, possibly, not a hundred yards from where he stood and that he had not the right to make his presence known to her. He went yet more slowly, loth to leave the place behind him. But it dropped remorselessly in his wake, dawdle as he might, and the side-road leading past the house ended on the edge of the mountain turf. He was just going to put his foot into the stirrup-iron when he saw her sitting in the shadow of a ragged hawthorn bush with a book on her knee. If he followed the track he was on he would pass close enough to her to touch her.

She was so much absorbed in her reading that she did not notice his approach, and, as the grass dulled the sound of his horse's tread, she only raised her head when he was close to her.

"Mr. Waring!" she exclaimed.

She looked bewildered, and Aythan, who would

Digitized by Google

have given a good deal to know whether she was glad or sorry to see him, or merely indifferent, could find nothing in her face but surprise.

"I thought you had gone away, sir," she explained. "I was told you had gone for good."

"But I have come back," said he.

"Oh, I am so glad," said Barbara impulsively. And then, wondering what had induced her to make such a remark, she blushed, and Aythan had visions of paradise.

He stood silent; the sight of the book in her hand made him fear that he ought to ride on and leave her to it.

But, apparently, it was one of his lucky days; for at that moment she noticed the dust on his boots.

"You have come some way, I expect," she said.

"Yes; I have ridden from Hereford."

"Then you must be tired."

Aythan was about as much tired as when he had started that morning, but he had mother-wit to see his advantage.

"I am," he replied. "It would be very pleasant to rest here for a short time, if I may sit down by you."

She drew her muslin skirt a little aside; and, having put the rein over a branch that protruded, like an elbow, from the bush, he flung himself down by her on the grass.

They were not half a mile from Tillestone, but it seemed to him that they were as much alone as if they had been in a desert. The soft wind came, pure and clean, along the empty uplands from the distant chequered sweep of Radnorshire, and the thyme, growing in the short turf about them,

Digitized by Google

touched it faintly with its breath. It was very still. A cock crowed from some hidden cottage yard among the fields by the Court.

He sat a little farther down the mound than his companion, and he could see the outline of her face and neck clear against the warm greyness of the sky; he would have liked, had he dared, to look at her without ever taking his eyes away. He had ridden up to Tillestone hoping to see her, but scarcely acknowledging to himself how much he wanted to do so. What a hypocrite he had been! But he knew now that he would never be able to deceive himself again; not even half-heartedly.

"Do you often come here to read?" he asked.

"Yes," said she. "It is so quiet; there is nothing to disturb one. But very often I do not even open my book. I begin to think about all the strange things that have happened in this mountain, and of all the people who have lain dead for years round the little churches down towards the valley, and all the witches and ghosts that the country folk talk of. I am not very clever," she added; "at least I know my governesses never thought I was, and I like these things better than books."

Aythan made no reply for a moment. He had not supposed that girls' minds ran in such channels.

"Perhaps many people might not understand what you mean," he said at last; "but I am quite sure that your governesses had not much sense."

"But do you understand?" she said.

"I think I do. But *I* am not clever. I could never have put what you said into words, and I could never think of it for myself."

"I am so glad my father has bought Tillestone

Digitized by Google

and not rented it. He cannot imagine why I like it so much."

Calamity suddenly stared at Aythan through her words.

"He will never sell it again—he will not leave?" he exclaimed.

"Oh no. The house suits him admirably. He is charmed with it. He has all the things he has collected for years arranged in it. He would not disturb them for anything now; and he very seldom goes beyond the garden."

"But does he receive visitors?" asked Aythan. "Would he allow me to call upon him? Or is he an invalid?"

"No, no," she laughed. "I was going to say that he is as strong as you are, but I hardly meant that. He is not an active man—he lives with his pictures and his books."

"But will he let me come?" continued Aythan, who found this description irrelevant. He did not care what Mr. Troup was like so long as he might gain admission to his house.

"Certainly; yes. But all this time I am forgetting to tell you that Mrs. Bridges intends to visit me. And I have met Mr. Waring, your cousin. It was he who told me you had left Crishowell and were not coming back."

"You have met Eustace!"

Those two most opposing types of humanity—the intensely feminine and the completely reasonable—may be disgusted to learn that a furious access of animal jealously assailed Aythan at these words; no taunt, no insolent look, nothing that Eustace had ever said or done, or induced Hester to say or

Digitized by Google

do—and he knew well who had inspired her dismissal of him,—had raised such rage in him as did the thought that he had seen Barbara. He had looked at her, and that was enough; he had—possibly—touched her hand, and that was more than enough. A cloud grew over this golden hour that was his. In this wideness of solitude which enveloped them both, she was his too, and the shadow of Eustace had no right to fall over the border of that kingdom in which they sat alone.

Then it came on him that, in a few minutes, they must part, and go, she to her proper place and surroundings and he to his; and the miles between them that, before he fell in with her, had seemed so short, became endless. He was as miserable as, a moment before, he had been happy; for he was only a boy; the most human and masculine boy possible.

He had turned away his face and she could not see his expression, nor how his heavy eyebrows lowered over the fire in his eyes.

"Perhaps you will come with them," she began.

"No," he broke in. "I cannot. Eustace was right when he said I had gone for good. I have returned as you see, but not to Crishowell House. I am Sir Helbert Bucknall's agent now, and I have come back to live at Rood Farm and look after the part of his property that ends just about here. There is one of the march stones in the hillside over yonder."

"You will be able to take me up for trespassing," said Barbara.

But he did not smile.

His position with regard to Wern grew more dis-

Digitized by Google

tasteful as he realised that she must know of it. There was nothing derogatory in his duty of protecting the property of the man who employed him, but, at the same time, he could imagine how Eustace might treat the subject. In his hands it would become dirty work. In all his life it had never entered his head to think of his own social standing, or even to consider whether he had one; but now the way in which the thing or its lack would appear to Barbara mattered to him terribly. If she could only understand how he stood!

"Will it annoy you if I tell you something about myself?" he asked, tearing up the thyme-blossom with his fingers.

"Indeed, no, sir," she replied, with a little return of formality.

Aythan was so much unused to talking of his own affairs that he made almost as bald a business of it with Barbara as he had done with Harry Stotson; but she listened eagerly. His short statement of his plans and of the bonds that held him to the soil told her nothing of what lay beneath it, for he did not belong to that race of moral mendicants whose wounds are their stock-in-trade. He left everything out of his explanation which had any bearing on Eustace or Hester, or which could give any clue to their relations. All he wished her to grasp was the fact that he was a working man and that he meant to earn his pay, though the manner of doing so might not be the one he would have chosen. But he had no idea how the depth and beauty of his voice spoke for him.

"And you love this country so much that it has

Digitized by Google

brought you back?" she said, when the meagre history was ended.

"Yes," said Aythan, his eyes on his spurs.

He did not dare to look her in the face, for he knew that he was lying.

"I like that; it is what I should feel too," she said softly.

But he kept his head still turned from her; he was between the devil and the deep sea.

"Sir Helbert is a hard man," he said, after they had sat in silence for a little while; "but, if I take his money, I must serve him with all my might. That is true, is n't it? But I may have to be a hard master too to these wretched people—people I have known always—some that I like."

He raised his head at last and she understood him, and looked with her honest eyes straight into his.

"And are you troubling yourself for fear I may think badly of you for what you are doing?"

He made a sound of assent.

"Put that from you, utterly," she said quietly.

"You know," he continued, "it may be—it is just possible—that Mrs. Bridges or my cousin may not see it as you do—as I see it. You may hear things of me that will not please you. What will you think?"

His voice was not quite steady.

For one moment she laid her hand frankly on his.

"Listen to me, sir," she said. "I am not sure whether to feel proud or humble that you have spoken to me in this way. But of one thing I *am*

Digitized by Google

sure; and that is that I shall never have to think ill of you."

There was pride in her face.

Aythan held himself together. To look at her now was to lose his head. But to his troubled heart there came a flood of light, a glory from that lamp which a woman may hold up for a man; a glory that none can take from him and none darken; a light by which he may walk, and live, and die.

There was a suggestion in his stillness that made her rise to her feet.

"Now I must go home," she said.

He had meant to ask her where she had met Eustace and how their meeting had come about, but the whole matter went out of his mind. He did not care for Eustace, nor for twenty Eustaces. The light from Barbara's lamp had thrown him back into the shadows.

He said nothing as he got up and roused the cob from his peaceful grazing. She stood by him as he was about to mount, patting the horse.

He turned to her suddenly; he could not go from her leaving the veriest shade of untruth between them.

* * * * * *

"I was not quite honest when you asked me what had brought me back. There was something else. Perhaps I will tell you about it, some day."

"He has a wonderful voice," said Barbara to herself, as she picked up her book when he had gone. "it makes whatever he says sound important."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XII

EUSTACE'S FAMILIAR

Clarence Troup stood with his daughter at the hall door and watched their visitors departing with unusual interest in his face.

"I think it was very clever of Benny Bowen to call Mrs. Bridges 'a fashion-made madam,'" said Barbara. "I quite understand his meaning. It is curious that I have always pictured her in a hat with feathers, though not in such a becoming one, I admit."

"If there were more people like her in this uncouth place I should be pleased," replied he. "If we are to meet our fellow-creatures at all, I prefer them to be civilised. And that young Waring, too —I saw him glancing at the snuff-boxes; but I suppose it would be too much to expect that he should have any taste or discernment."

Though Mr. Troup classed the receding couple with persons he could tolerate he was so shrewdly compelled by his customary mood that it sprang on him with the turning of their backs. He sighed as he re-entered the hall.

"He is very pleasant," replied the girl; "but I like his cousin better."

"If he is superior to this one he must be a very

Digitized by Google

presentable man indeed. Why do you prefer him?"

Barbara hesitated. "It is difficult to say, sir," she replied. "I think, perhaps, because there is something about him I can hardly describe—something trustworthy."

"Ah," said her father, "you may find twenty trustworthy men for one who can wear his clothes like a gentleman. And that, Mr. Waring knows how to do."

Their two guests were very silent as they trotted homewards, Eustace driving and the light chaise running smoothly behind the pair of dark browns that Matthew had bought not long before his death. The hood, which was up, raised a barrier between them and the groom, and allowed them to talk without risk of being overheard. But neither seemed inclined to take advantage of it.

There was a cloud on Hester's face which the knowledge of having produced a good impression on her host could not dispel. The glimpse she had caught of herself in a looking-glass at Tillestone told her that she was at her best, and the drive had heightened her colour; the shade of a large hat with sweeping grey plumes softened her eyes and intensified the richness of her abundant hair. It was strange that her companion, never oblivious of such matters, had not so much as mentioned her looks, though she had consulted him when ordering the gown which she wore to-day for the first time. There were other troublesome thoughts at work, too, for she had learned from Barbara Troup that Aythan had come back and was settled on the border of her own property as Sir Helbert Bucknall's

Digitized by Google

agent. It was hard, she felt, for she had believed herself to have seen the last of him. She had an unreasonable hatred of his being so near, although she was certain that he would avoid Crishowell; she felt as if he were a kind of fate pursuing her, an influence of which she was never to be free.

And this was not her only annoyance as she sat stiff and silent by the man she loved, for Barbara had roused a fear which gnawed at her heart. She was almost old enough to be the girl's mother, and the sight of Eustace's evident admiration for her had given her a pang. Not that she undervalued herself; she knew that, in spite of having no claim to accepted beauty, she was a woman whose figure and carriage, whose knowledge of dress and effect, would put many, holding themselves her superior in feature, into the shade. She looked no more like Barbara's mother than she looked like Eustace's as they swung along the turnpike road, challenging the appreciative eyes of such travellers as paused to watch the striking couple roll by behind their well-bred and well-groomed horses. But, in that hour, Hester Bridges would have given her chances of salvation for Barbara's youth.

It had angered her to see her lover's eyes follow the girl, lit by the lurking smile which was their characteristic, and, above all, to notice that most explicit of all the signs that betray the attraction of a man, the fact that he is never for a moment unconscious of a woman's sayings, whether they are addressed to himself or not, and is mentally answering each one. She had seen enough to make her ask Miss Troup to show her the garden and to rejoice as they left the two men to entertain each

Digitized by Google

other alone. It was in the garden that she heard of Aythan's return.

She wondered, while she sat with averted face by his side, whether Eustace knew of it from Mr. Troup; but reflecting that, were this so, he would scarcely keep his news till they were half-way home, a little flame of malice leaped in her as she turned to give him what she knew would be unwelcome information. It is possible that she loved him, at this moment, more fiercely than she had ever done yet; but, in ordinary life, men are governed by their interests and women by their tempers, and in love it is often not different.

"Of course you have heard about Aythan?" she began.

"No," replied Eustace calmly; "what has happened to him?"

"He has come back. I told you he would not go far."

"Come back?" repeated he.

"Miss Troup mentioned it, thinking I knew. It appears that Sir Helbert Bucknall has taken him as agent to look after the places that belong to him round the mountain. She says he is living at a farm not far from Wern village. I did not catch the name, and I would not ask her to repeat it, for I was afraid she would think it strange I did not know. People would say such hateful things if they imagined I had quarrelled with him. But I know it is somewhere near Wern."

"A kind of gentleman-ploughboy-hermit!" exclaimed Eustace. "I can picture him."

"But I doubt the hermit," interposed Hester dryly. "The way to Tillestone is too short."

Digitized by Google

She was in no mood for lightness.

"All roads lead to Rome," said Eustace, with an unnecessary flick at the off horse; "and I fancy all roads lead to any place one wishes to get to. What did she say about the purse?"

"She merely thanked me and put it in her pocket."

"A penny saved is a penny gained," said Eustace. "I feel so clever this afternoon, Hester. Proverbs come rushing into my mind."

He was as well aware of her undercurrent of displeasure with himself as if it had been explained to him; he guessed at its cause, too, and he was taking that satisfactory revenge which a person with humour can take on one who is devoid of it. There was not a ray of humour in Hester, and the cheerful futility of his comments stung her. Levity can only be met by levity, and he knew that, as he grew more trivial, she would grow more earnest.

The sun may shine upon the just and the unjust, but knowledge in the choice of weapons has not been given to us all; indeed, one may almost suspect that the unjust have the nicer discernment. A man of honor and probity denouncing some slippery rogue whose vanity can only be reached by a jest, and whose half-closed eye is upon the audience, is a searching sight; it affects our sympathies and the corners of our mouths; the former disagreeably, the latter pleasantly, and the rogue is none the worse. What searches us yet more is to see a man expending well-balanced and honest reason on a mind that has no apprehension of truth, when a few halfpence worth of solid oaths would produce not only respect, but, curiously enough,

Digitized by Google

actual conviction. But we shall have to look on such things and their like for some time yet.

"I could see that you made a fine effect on Mr. Troup," continued Eustace, as his companion sat dumb; "and I dare say it may last. If I had the feelings of a gentleman I should stand aside. Then you might have the happiness of being Aythan's mother twice over; first his step-mother, so to say, then his mother-in-law; and I should hang myself on a weeping willow."

It was evident that his nonsense jarred on her, for she made a muffled sound of impatience.

"Oh, you need not be afraid, for it would not bear me. Weeping willows have thin branches, you know, Hester."

"Sometimes I think you have no heart," said she.

"It is on my sleeve for daws to peck at. But you are not a daw, my dear, you are a turtle-dove. We know that."

His tone might well have made her weep; but she had all the strength of a woman with one idea; let him wring her soul; she would bear it so long as he did not escape from the meshes of her love.

One of the six months of their concealed betrothal had gone by, and Eustace had scarcely troubled himself to contemplate the farther end of the chain that bound him. Should he be disinclined to make the engagement public at the proposed time, he would, no doubt, find some pretext to fetch to his rescue. Everything was in his own control, for Hester, not having the safeguard of publicity, could bring no pressure to bear on him, and, though Aythan stood in the background like a shadow, she

Digitized by Google

herself had put her possible champion out of action. One thing he had made up his mind to do, and that was to see more of Barbara Troup before the final renouncement of his liberty; and, while he did not suppose that there was anything very serious between her and his cousin, he would almost have liked to think differently, because the chance of supplanting him would be so well worth his most strenuous endeavours. To flirt with her, to wipe out any dawning feeling for Aythan that might be in her heart, and then to settle into ease and consideration with Hester was a shrewd mixing of pleasure and profit which he felt himself agreeably capable of carrying out. And Mr. Troup had invited him to come back to Tillestone in a manner which would make everything easy. It was a passionless enterprise; but, hitherto, even his passions had dealt lightly with him. Life had brought him no experience which had made him suspect the presence, in himself, of anything he could not control.

But Hester had travelled far in the last few weeks; she could hardly identify the Hester of past years with herself, and the placid being who had accepted Matthew and the advantages he brought, without a thought of deeper needs, seemed to her, now, to be scarcely human. The bitter part of it was that her awakening had come so late, and that so many of those years which, in the case of more fortunate women, are filled with love, with expansion, with motherhood, lay behind her. Eustace had suggested life's possibilities and lifted the curtain that hung between her and the light beyond; she had looked and her eyes were dazzled. With the

Digitized by Google

coming of that light the whole remorselessness of her nature, the quality that had peeped mockingly at him when she told him of Aythan's dismissal, had sprung into activity. Anything which might divide her from the man she adored, the man who held for her the issues of love and of destiny, was so much clay to be trodden underfoot. The smouldering sentimental friendship which, during her husband's lifetime, had mitigated the dulness of her days, was gone: it had done its duty and was cast away. She flung it from her as the goose-girl, to whom her prince-lover has brought a crown, flings away her rags, in the tales of our youth.

Her resentful dislike of Aythan had had its beginning in no jealousy of the place he held in her husband's affections, for she had not loved her husband. But the want of understanding between the ill-assorted couple had divided the house, and that predisposition to partisanship which is in nearly every woman had made her look upon the young man with the distrustful prejudice of one belonging to a different faction. She had forseen in the days of half-defined love-making which preceded Eustace's declaration that he would take their engagement ill, treading, as it did, on the very heels of decency. Mourning, at that date, was longer and more punctiliously adhered to than it is now, when nigh upon another century has passed; a century which has, perhaps, slackened English conventions more than any of its predecessors. She knew that he would feel much as if she had turned the dead man's shroud into a wedding veil; and his discovery of the situation before it was an hour old, and before she and her lover had time to collect

Digitized by Google

their thoughts, added fuel to her antagonism. But she had misjudged him in this, as she had in everything else. She did not understand that, however little he liked the idea of her marriage, he was prepared to put all sentimental considerations by and look with common-sense upon a matter in which she and his cousin were alone concerned. She never, for a moment, guessed the suspicion which was sickening Aythan, the suspicion that Eustace had been her lover in word and in deed before she had become Matthew's widow.

Though she had none of the feeling that will bind some with indissoluble bonds to the soil on which they live, and none of that strange faculty possessed by certain men and women—men especially—of seeing through the externals of a particular district or country into the very spirit of its life, Hester had developed a vivid sense of possession. The place she had cared for so little in Matthew's lifetime had an altered relation to her since it had become her own. If she had gained no sentimental interest from it she had yet acquired a consciousness of safeguarded power, an interest personal enough to regard any touch on it as an outrage. The fields and woods sloping before her, the uplands that climbed to the feet of the mountain, were outward and visible signs of her place in the world that a somewhat prolonged spinsterhood had clouded with the suggestion of her own undistinguished past in it. Women who had failed to lay permanent hold on some elusive coat-tail had scant consideration in the days when she sat, an indistinct figure, among a crowd of female relations. She looked back with both satisfaction and regret;

Digitized by Google

satisfaction, when she contrasted the new times with the old, and regret for the barrenness of so many of her best years. But the crown of life was not within her grasp yet.

And then, as she looked forward, Aythan stood in her path again. The children she might have—Eustace's children—born and brought up in the house of which their father was master, would probably live to be turned out of it by Aythan. All that she could give Eustace and the sons he might beget would be taken from them at her death, and Aythan would reign as if she and hers had never been. She had thrust him out, once, but in the end he would come back to put what would be dearer to her than her own life to the door. He had been created, it seemed, to frustrate her at every point. There were times when she wished herself and him set back into the Middle Ages, that she might watch the wax of his abhorred image dwindle in the fire of her hate. To make her position harder, Eustace's father had died during her widowhood, and Aythan's death without issue would convert her future husband into her own heir. Small wonder if Hester Bridges scarcely knew herself for the creature of her youth, for her heart was the battlefield of pagan forces, the mere mention of which would have horrified the woman she had ceased to be.

"I wish I could remember the name of the place where Aythan is living," she began at last, rousing herself and crushing down her ill-humor.

They were passing "The White Cow," for her companion had suggested that they should drive on to Crishowell village. He had a message to send to the carpenter.

Digitized by Google

"So do I," replied he; "and there are a good many other things I should like to know. I wonder what was in his mind when he threw in his lot with Sir Helbert? I suppose it is really true; but one can never tell. How did Miss Troup know?"

"He told her himself?"

"Then he has been there already!"

"She said nothing about it and I did not ask. Perhaps that was foolish, but it would have looked so odd, I thought."

Eustace gave a low, meditative whistle.

"No doubt they meet somewhere," observed Hester, with a toss of her sweeping feathers.

They drew up in silence by the field below the village, and the groom was sent across it with the message. Eustace turned the chaise round and they waited while the man's figure reduced itself to doll-like proportions on the green stretch.

As they sat in silence a distant footstep grew clearer on the road behind them, but, the hood being up, the approaching person was concealed till she was alongside of the carriage.

"Here, Moll!" cried Eustace when he saw her; "come and make a curtsey to the lady. Your manners are so fine that I should like her to see them."

Moll responded with a grave but violent dip of her body. Her eyes were fixed upon Hester whom she had never before seen at such close quarters.

"I see you admire Mrs. Bridges," said Eustace, in the bantering tone he generally used when speaking to her.

"Like enough. But her do look tired-like—same as her might cry," replied she, with one of those

Digitized by Google

summer-lightning flashes of insight that play upon the horizon of damaged minds.

"Let her go, Eustace," said Hester, reddening.

"She never cries!" exclaimed he. "What can such a beautiful lady have to cry for?"

"Ah! women all do. Her may cry yet," said Moll; her hawk's gaze seeming to swallow Hester.

"Do drive on," urged she again, plucking at his sleeve; her nerves were so much on edge that the woman's face almost terrified her.

"We must wait for Charles," said he.

"Charles can walk up the hill. Drive on—she is quite right; I am tired. I want to get home."

But he leaned out farther towards Moll.

"What is that you are fumbling with?" asked he.

She seemed to have forgotten the existence of the other woman; she was untwisting something from the corner of a rag drawn from her pocket.

"There be the groat!" said she, holding up the fourpenny piece he had given her after her mission to Benny. "Betsy did want me to give it her. But not I!"

She laughed, and the strange laughter made Hester shudder; she felt that she would lose command of herself if Eustace did not dismiss their companion; but she said nothing. There was no appeal to the hard lightness of his mood.

"This is the very person we want," said he, turning to her. "Moll, you shall have another groat if you will do another message as well as you did the last. Do you know Wern village?"

"Up there?" said the woman, throwing out her arm towards the hill country. "I were working

Digitized by Google

there yesterday; wheelin' wood for the Green Jiner's wife, I were."

"If you will go to Wern and ask where Mr. Aythan Waring lives I will give you another groat when you come back and tell me. Come to Crishowell House."

"Be I to go now?"

"No; to-morrow will do. And, Moll, if anybody asks who sent you, what will you say?"

"I 'll say it be you, for sure."

"No; you must not do that. You must say: 'I can't mind.'"

"I can't mind," repeated she.

"And now I will tell you why. If anybody knew it was I who sent you some harm might happen to me," said he solemnly.

A look of horror came into her face.

"You would not like that, Moll."

She stared at him blankly.

"But nothing can hurt me if you don't tell. You will not, will you?"

"Not if I was to be dead for it," said she slowly.

"Then I shall be quite safe; go on now, like a good soul, and come to me for the groat when you have been to Wern."

"She is much more reliable than if she were sane," he observed to Hester as Moll went her way. "She can only think of one thing at a time. But I had to frighten her a little. I should n't like Aythan to hear of my inquiry."

The groom was returning over the field, and soon they were driving homewards. Before they reached "The White Cow" they overtook Moll again.

Digitized by Google

"It is almost as if you had called up an evil spirit," said Hester.

"Poor Moll, she is not evil," he replied, with a smile; "but she was sent into the world to be useful to me. Long ago, every decent person had his familiar. Why should not I have mine?"

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIII

THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE

By the time November came and the countryside emerged, grim and bare, from its soft clothing of autumn, Aythan had settled down to his work. Not once had he seen his cousin or Hester, and the only thing to break the sameness of his days was the ever-present possibility of meeting Barbara Troup. For that chance he would have been content with a far more monotonous life than the one he led. He had called formally at Tillestone, but, though Mr. Troup had been civil, his daughter did not need to be told how infinitely he preferred Eustace. The pleasure of hearing her spoken of would sometimes constrain him to go by devious ways to Benny Bowen's cottage, though nothing else in the world could have drawn him to Crishowell.

When two people are active, both much alone, and each continually thinking of the other, a few miles of mountain turf between them is not of much account; and, though these two had never yet made a settled tryst, their intimacy had grown well, fostered by the hand of what could not truthfully be called chance. Barbara had not reached the point at which Aythan had burned since the day of his return, she yet allowed him to pervade her thoughts,

Digitized by Google

and, in them, he stood for the embodiment of male attraction. In the wandering life she had led she had seen men of all sorts and kinds; she had been made love to frequently and enjoyed the process as much as did other women. Had Aythan been the clod his cousin pretended to take him for it is certain she would not have spared him a thought, but she knew enough of men and matters to give Eustace's insinuations their right value. Besides this she had gathered from one source and another enough material from which to piece together a remarkably good outline of the situation at Crishowell, so far as it concerned him. Gossip had reached even the exclusive quiet of Tillestone, for the story of Matthew's unsigned will had leaked out and was still fresh in local remembrance. The groom too, the only one among the many dependents of Crishowell House to bid Aythan good-bye, had had a deal to say after the young man rode away, and several imaginary versions of the upheaval which led to his going had now been common talk for some time. The one thing unsuspected by anybody was the relationship of the pair who were left.

Eustace had carried out his intention of being a great deal at Tillestone, straining every nerve to be agreeable to his host with a success that natural versatility and his ready tongue made easy. He would spend hours with him over his prints, his books, his snuff-boxes, rewarded by glimpses of Barbara; he walked with her in the garden, he sat with her in the dusk, returning each time to Hester with a greater sense of the inadequacy of his feeling for her. But he put all thoughts of the inevitable from him, living in the present alone, and

Digitized by Google

trying, by a thousand small assiduities, to reassure her when she reproached him, as she often did, for the time spent at Tillestone.

Barabara had seen enough of him to convince her that her fabric of supposition was a picture of the truth, and she would hardly have been human if she had not tried to gather a little more material from Aythan. But Aythan was silent; not even to her would he speak of what he had resolved to ignore; and she, divining so much more than he imagined, told her heart that the self-contained young man was built of a stuff that would not yield, in essentials, even to herself. Like all women, she admired strength; and she was old enough in understanding to set the strength of soul, that is so habitual as to be calm, above many more attractive qualities. Dependence on herself and long hours of reflection brought by solitude had taught her the value of much that girls of her age—even thoughtful ones—are apt to pass over, and she had lived enough among men to see them more from their own point of view than from that of her sex. The bonds which held her and her undeclared lover together were forged from the highest parts of their own natures. It was small wonder if the admiration Eustace was careful to show her plainly availed nothing, for she had seen a man and had no eyes for anything less. But, no woman ever being quite insensible to the fact that she is admired, she was willing to make herself pleasant; and the more so as it gratified her malice to see that the person she shrewdly regarded as Aythan's enemy was stepping steadily into a fool's paradise. Too honest to lead him on by the smallest encouragement, she yet en-

Digitized by Google

joyed the trouble he gave himself; and when, after his visits, she would hear some slighting allusion to Aythan from her father, she looked forward with more than complacency to a day when possibly her own hand might deal him discomfiture.

When the elder Stotson, looking over his spectacles, warned his client that what he was undertaking "would not be a nice job," he fell something short of the truth. It was difficult indeed for Aythan, trained as he had been by a liberal landlord, to accustom himself to the conditions of his work. If Matthew Bridges had been before his day in the enlightened justice of his dealings with his tenants, Sir Helbert Bucknall was proportionately behind it. The unsavoury dwelling-houses, the gaping roofs, the underpaid labourers revolted a man whose work had been taught him on entirely opposite principles. He listened daily to complaints which were no outcome of idle grumbling and saw evils he had no power to remedy. The farms tucked into the folds of the damp valley were reeking with the moisture which oozed from their mud floors, and the white-faced children playing round the manure heaps by the dark and stifling "beast-houses" made him sick of his trade. It was of little use for their parents to show him the cracks in the walls, the doors that would not shut, the standing water that could not be carried away, for he had no power to improve anything. He would look at the whirl of dusty-coloured flies on the stagnant pools whose level was higher than that of the threshold and turn away with an angry heart, promising to use what influence he could with the

Digitized by Google

landlord and knowing all the time that he had none.

The passing months had taught him how futile, how boyish, had been his vague hope of stirring Sir Helbert to action. He had seen him a couple of times since he had entered his service and spoken his mind as respectfully as a young man can speak it to another more than double his age. The first time he had been listened to in dogged silence, and the next told that he was "a damned impudent young dog." He had raged and fumed and kept his raging and fuming under, that he might not have to go down the hill at Sir Helbert's request, as he had gone at Hester's not a year before.

A part of his trial too was the difference which had come over his relations with the people about him. There was scarcely any one living in or round the village of Wern whom he had not known from his childhood. Though they had no connection but that of proximity with Crishowell, the inhabitants of the clustered cottages that clung like limpets to the hillside were old acquaintances. As an urchin of adventurous and catholic tastes he had spent many illicit hours among the various runagates who had now grown with himself to man's estate; he had sat at many a squalid hearth and spent not a few of his pennies on the detestable sweetstuff sold in the tiny shop, whose whiskets and besoms were stacked away among the gray balls of "lye" and other domestic necessaries by the wall behind the counter. All these things he had admired with the fine ardour of youth. But now it was impossible to set foot in the little place without

Digitized by Google

seeing that his welcome there was a thing of the past.

Sarah Ukyn had always been a friend of his, but now there was a sting in Sarah's tongue; and Tom, her husband, whose habit it was to look over the shoulder of every one to whom he spoke, seemed to be focussing eternity if he exchanged a sentence with him. Once he had been hit by a stone as he went by the patches of scrub where the Wern children played; and, though he had pretended to take the missile as a joke and tossed it back with a laugh, the silence behind the broom and the scuttle of retreating feet told him that there was more than joke in the business. He almost disliked passing the hamlet, for it seemed to him as if every window in its tumble-down walls was alive with unseen but hostile eyes.

Rood Farm, in which he had made his home, stood at the foot of a cleft in the mountain, a dull old house, larger than most of its kind, with enough accommodation to allow him to live in complete separation from the tenant and his family. His rooms, which looked westward, had been added within his own recollection and made an ugly excrescence on the original building. As the yard with its outhouse was on the other side of the place his privacy was absolute. The aspect of his diamond panes annoyed the young man, though he liked the quiet it insured him; for his sun, in common with that of the rest of the world, rose in the east, away along the thyme-covered stretch to Tillestone; and that stretch was commanded by the farmer's windows, but not by his own. Often he chafed to think how easily a rider might be passing within half a

Digitized by Google

mile of the house, while he was the only person in it unconscious of that soul-shaking event. Often when accounts and writing kept him within his own walls he would rise and go out into the hedged-in strip before his doorstep and stand there in a colossus-like attitude of contemplation, his feet wide apart, his hands deep in his breeches pockets, and a cloud of wistful discontent on his brows; looking towards the open spaces for some moving thing. Then he would curse himself for a fool and enter again to sit stoically down to his work.

At the other side of the house, looking as squarely to the east as Aythan did to the west, was its other attendant incongruity. Scarcely a stone's throw from the gate, on a slope of rising ground, stood Rood church, the almost forgotten edifice which had given the place its name. Once in the month the Vicar of Talgarth would ride to the farm, and, having put his nag in the stable, proceed to hold a perfunctory service in the squat gray church, that, cut off like an island from the mainland of its proper associations, stood isolated on the grass. The most part of the churchyard wall had fallen and was traceable in narrow mounds pushing up through the green; from the sudden but concealed undulations which would bring the unsuspecting loiterer heavily on his face, it might be judged that there were as many gravestones below ground as above it. The shaft of an ancient dial thrust itself up among them like a warning finger; and the silence which is in birdless places invested the spot with a solemnity the church was too small and too homely to inspire. The whole neighbourhood had a monotonous, odd atmosphere, depressing, per-

Digitized by Google

haps, to the dweller in the valley whose soul was held by the tendrils of his own green hedges and lured by the luscious river-pasture. But, to Aythan, it had the attraction of expectation. The world, holding the mirror for each man, reflects most strongly that part of him which dominates the rest; and this soundless spot was unconsciously pervaded, for him, by the reflection of his own heart, that was waiting.

He knew very well that he had small right to grumble or quarrel with fate. If he were on the rack he was not in worse case than any lover who is not sure of his mistress's mind; and, while he saw that Barbara was the least likely of women to fall into the arms of the first man who held them out, there was that in her manner to him when they met that bade him take courage. He had accepted his present business with the sole idea of being near her. Money was not a thing which would stand in his way, for, if he had no more than enough to live on frugally with a wife, the circumstance of his being heir to Crishowell gave his position solidity and would insure the future of his children. He told himself that he need not hesitate to ask any girl to marry him who would be content with a country life and who would overlook what he rather ruefully considered his own plain personality, for the sake of the love she would see beyond it. He meant to ask Barbara, manfully, to take him when the time came, and the only thing that struck him as a likely obstacle to her consent was himself. But of one thing he was certain. Should heaven stoop to earth and the delirious glories of his dreams become waking facts, should she really come to love

Digitized by Google

him, he need fear nothing. He knew, in some hidden recess of his understanding, that she was as brave as a lion; that when he met her he would meet her on the heights, royally; that there would be no lurking in sheltered ways to avoid the winds of adversity; that, when she put her hand in his, it would be a hand as strong as his own.

Thus he possessed his soul in patience and went about his work, knowing that he must give her time. And thus he lived from day to day, not looking much forward to the end; for the thought of the end, let it fall out which way it would, made his heart beat almost to faintness.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIV

THE WAR-PATH

In the dead hour following on a November midnight Aythan was sitting in his room. He had kept up the fire and its light flickered on the ceiling and the rough furniture, and played odd tricks with shadows among the coats hanging on pegs at the wall. He was fully dressed, and, as he looked at his watch and saw that its smaller hand had passed one, he rose and began to hunt about among certain objects in a corner. The little bull-terrier on the hearth, his companion since he had come to Rood Farm, sat up and whined as she saw what she guessed was a preliminary to going out.

When he had chosen a stick, he threw up the window and stood a moment, staring out by the darkened pane; he could see nothing, for, beyond it, everything was blurred with night. The little dog frisked towards him, all the length of her forelegs on the floor and her tail much higher than her head, and, setting her forefeet against his knee, looked up into his face with one of those dog-noises which are neither yawn nor whine, but which mean "take me with you." Then, as she found herself unnoticed, she sneezed and laid her head against the side of his boot.

Digitized by Google

She followed him, leaping, as he returned to the hearth, and he took her up in his arms, throwing back his head to avoid the onslaught of her pink tongue.

"No, my dear," he said, petting her; "poor Nelly, you must stay at home to-night."

He put her on the floor and went to fetch her collar; and, at the sight of it, she began to run round the table, for she was young and had not yet seen much of the inevitable, that master of dogs and men. When it was buckled round her neck she sat down and cried. He put a long piece of cord through the ring and tied her to the solid table-leg, giving her almost tether enough to cross the room, and she watched him, shivering and complaining as he took down a coat and buttoned himself into it. Before going out he picked her up and kissed the top of her white head. "Be good, Nelly; lie down," he commanded, throwing all the roughness he could into his rich voice and tossing her into the arm-chair. But she would not be comforted, and he could hear her cries as he went round the house.

He struck into a narrow way that led towards Wern. There was just clearness enough in the heavens for him to see the dark mass of Rood church on its little eminence. The windows were set low in the wall and a shine of subdued light which appeared for a moment through one of them made him pause to wonder who could be inside the building. Milman, the tenant of Rood Farm, his own landlord, was supposed to enter the place occasionally to look round it and let in fresh air, but he scarcely expected that Milman would be carry-

Digitized by Google

ing out these perfunctory duties at such an hour. He stood, irresolute whether to go and see for himself or not, his curiosity stirred, but he went on his way, for there was more important work awaiting him that night.

At Wern village things had come to a climax; for, in the early darkness of approaching winter, the inhabitants, to whom the trade in besoms and whiskets was the harvest of the year, were busy weaving and binding and fashioning these marketable things. Ash, birch, and hazel, and the stronger twigs of the broom, were to them what the seed is to the farmer; and this plant of raw material growing at their doors, though it served many purposes, had long been insufficient for their needs. There was no waste in the industry of the Wern people; they might be shiftless and thriftless themselves, but they saw to it that no shred of the stuff in their hands shirked the fulfilment of its destiny. The bits of twig left over from the weaving were almost as valuable as the long hazel-strips which bound the baskets, for, with November, the sap had ceased to flow, and the living wood, when burnt, yielded the fine white ash, full of alkaline salt, from which the lye, or washing soda, was made. This, kneaded together with water, was sold in the round, grayish balls which Aythan had seen so often in the little shop as a child.

Complaints were pouring in from every side. It seemed as though the appointment of the new agent had acted as a challenge to the men whose thefts from bush and tree came round with late autumn as surely as the falling leaf. The farmers in the valley below the hamlet raged as they found fresh

Digitized by Google

gaps in their hedges where great boughs of hazel had been shorn away, and the smaller ash-trees displayed their mutilated branches, lopped by the knife. The birch, less frequent in the agricultural land, had almost ceased to exist.

Sir Helbert wrote angrily to Aythan. Never, he said, had the abuse grown to such proportions as it had taken this year, and never had he been so much pestered with the complaints of his other tenants. Things had been better under Aythan's predecessor and he supposed that he had been a fool to put a gentleman into the place to do nothing, when a good working man would have been earning his money. The letter was a characteristic one, for what really rankled in Sir Helbert's mind was not that his farmers were being robbed, but that his new agent did not appear to be earning his pay. But whatever his employer's motives were, Aythan was stung to the quick; and the more so as, in his heart, he knew a sneaking softness for the Wern people, bred of old kindness and a realisation of the dire poverty of the place. And, because he was no sentimentalist, the real futility of his feeling served as a spur to the sense of justice in him, and he made up his mind that the thieves must be caught, once for all, and the abuse stamped out beyond power of revival. The threats and exhortations he had used, the watches he had set, had failed to make any difference in the doings of that disreputable brood on the hillside, and now he was going to try what could be done with his own hands.

The moon had been on the wane for days, and he had found out that the Green Jiner and his fellows kept to their own legitimate preserves till

Digitized by Google

darker nights came round to shelter them and keep their exact identity from any local constables who might be prowling about. She was far on in her last quarter now and would not rise till just before dawn, so he guessed that, after the enforced honesty of the last fortnight, the marauders would be active.

As all those set to watch for them either before or just after midnight had come back no wiser than they went, it had occurred to Aythan that his own search should take place in the small hours of morning, for he had a suspicion that the Wern thieves accomplished their ends more by early rising than by going late to rest. He went along through the dark stillness lying on field and hedgerow, inherent dislike of his task giving way a little to a fundamental joy in the possibilities before him; he meant to lay some of these men by the heels and his duty demanded the exercise of what skill and strength he had. He did not mean to use the blackthorn in his hand, unless he should find himself in a tight place, but the thought that he might need it thrilled him. That he and the one or two men who awaited him farther down the hill were likely to be outnumbered put the affair on a footing he could better tolerate, though it disgusted him a little that Ned Prosser, Ukyn's bitter enemy, should be of the party. But Ned was a workman on one of the farms whose hedges had suffered most, and his personal grievances against Ukyn had made him wild to join in hunting him. It was a sorry job, thought Aythan, but he could not deny that, carnally, it was pleasant.

As he drew near Wern he made a half circle east-

Digitized by Google

ward of it, leaving the lanes and going across the fields. He paused, now and again, to listen for voices, and arrived at the spot where he was to be met by the other men without hearing any sound of humanity or doing more than scaring a few sleeping birds. The human world might have been extinct.

The place of meeting he had chosen was the side of a tree-hung pool of the Digedi brook, where the loud gurgle of water running into it would serve to cover any sound made by himself and his companions. As he approached it under the bare branches he could see the bulky figure of Ned Prosser sitting upon a stone. He found himself a place on another of the scattered boulders by the brook's course, and they waited in silence till the couple of men they expected should come.

The time went by slowly. Prosser, at his best, was not an inspiring companion, and, had he been so, Aythan had no inclination to talk. There was only one subject now which filled his mind when he was idle and could hardly be kept out of it when he was busy; and it was certainly not one he could discuss with Prosser. They sat like dark images with the dimness of the pool behind them and listened for the tread of their friends. There was no light by which Aythan could see the face of his watch, and, at last, as the unnumbered hours went by, slower for their lack of demarcation, he began to fear that the remainder of his little band had mistaken the place of meeting and gone somewhere else. He knew it must be far on towards morning, for he had not left Rood Farm till after one, and he judged it near upon two hours since he had begun

Digitized by Google

his vigil on the boulder. He drew closer to Prosser, whose complete stillness seemed remarkable, and found that he had slipped from his stone and was on the ground asleep. An impatient sigh broke from Aythan as he listened to Prosser's deep breathing; whom there was no use in waking till he had decided what to do.

He was certain now that the two he expected were not coming, and he guessed that it must be almost four o'clock. He hated the idea of going home and he determined to strike across country in the direction of Wern, keeping to the lower ground. The stillness was deep as he stood by his sleeping companion. There was not a breath of wind, and, for the time of year, it was not cold. He came out from the encircling bushes and looked up at the sky. The stars were visible, for the night had cleared and there was enough light to give shape to the objects immediately round him. He went back and roused Prosser.

It was evident that they would have to rely on themselves alone should they fall in with the men they were hunting. Aythan had dispensed with help from the constabulary, for he distrusted their wits and was inclined to distrust their will; he had spoken to no one of his intended action, merely choosing the two best young fellows he could think of from Sir Helbert's farms. He had not wanted Prosser's assistance, but Ned had learned from the other labourers what was afoot and insisted on going with them.

They took their way over the fields again, Aythan first, and Ned, internally resentful about his unfinished sleep, following a few paces behind. It

Digitized by Google

was too dark to go fast and they kept to the vicinity of the hedges, pausing at intervals to listen for steps or voices or the sound of breaking branches. Ned Prosser's zeal was forsaking him at every step, and, as the hours went by and their patrolling of the empty world had no result, they came to a standstill. The little horn of the moon was lifting in the east which told them they were not far off dawn, and Aythan was just about to advise the other to go home, when there rose from the slopes in front of them a sound that made them hold their breaths. From the next field a cracking noise came, followed by the rustling fall of twigs. They stood close together and listened; Aythan had but little trust in Ned, and he was determined not to lose his night's work for want of caution.

"Stay here," he whispered, "and don't move hand or foot till you hear me whistle. Then get over the stile and come as fast as you can. I must get close to him before he suspects that any one is near—he is cutting the hedge at the top of the field."

Prosser, when absolutely sober, was not adventurous and he was beginning to feel that lack of enthusiasm that is apt to set in with the chill hours of morning. As his companion got noiselessly over the stile he reflected that the thief might not be alone and that he, personally, was very well content where he was. He stood obediently in his place, yawning dismally but quietly; he was not tightly strung, either in body or mind, and sleep had relaxed the fibre of both.

They had been on foot for hours and daybreak was upon them. Aythan had been right in supposing early morning to be the Green Jiner's har-

Digitized by Google

vest-time and Prosser resented the notion that the miscreant had been enjoying his bed during the long watches in which he and the agent had been prowling the country. The sky was faintly gray and he could distinguish, from where he stood, the dim figure of a man against the line of hedge from which the sounds came.

Aythan crept up by the sheltering ditch on his left. The hedge which bounded the field where the ground rose ran at right angles to it, and he was unwilling to cut off the corner by crossing the grass, as there was enough light now, should the man turn in his direction, to make his approaching figure visible. Could he reach the corner where hedge and ditch met, a bend in the line of hazels on which the thief was at work would hide him successfully until he was within a few yards of him. He was almost sure that his quarry was Ukyn himself. He prayed that Prosser, by the stile, would have the sense to do as he was bid and keep quiet.

He reached the corner and turned along the hazel-topped bank. The man was hidden from him now and he approached more rapidly. He laid down his blackthorn stick, for he wanted to have his hands free to deal with Ukyn when it came to falling upon him from behind the projecting bushes that covered his advance. He was almost touching them when a noise made him look back to see a white object coming swiftly over the exact ground he had traversed. When it reached the place where the blackthorn lay there was a sharp yelp, and, before he realised what had happened, Nelly was springing upon him in the mad ecstasy of an emotional terrier which has successfully traced an

Digitized by Google

adored master at last. For the first time in their acquaintance he cursed her and pushed her from him. The short end of cord hanging to her collar was clogged with mud and slapped against him as she leaped, and he remembered, with a pang at his own stupidity, that he had left the window of his room open when he looked out into the darkness.

But, as he threw her off, she turned from him and became rigid for a moment, pricking her ears; then she dashed round the projecting bend of hedge, barking at the pitch of her lungs.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XV

THE WAR-PATH (*Continued*)

On the light space beyond the bend there showed suddenly, like a shadow-picture on a sheet, the figure of the Green Jiner. In that atmosphere, faintly pervaded by the deathliness of November daybreak, he stood, a moving shade, in which the face was merely a pale, distinguishable blur; and then he was gone, vanishing on the wan expanse that the coming light was widening round them. Aythan put two fingers in his mouth and sent a shrill whistle flying across the fields.

The dimness that swallowed Ukyn stretched round like a sea as Aythan sprang forward, guided by the barks of Nelly, who raced at the heels of the escaping man. The white spot of the little terrier's body was visible in the slowly increasing light, and, as the beat of the Green Jiner's footsteps was drowned by the sound of his own, the presence of his dog had become a help instead of a hindrance. They were going down the field at top speed, making, so he guessed, for the outlet at its lower end. There was no lane nor road within some distance, and, Wern village lying high up behind them, Aythan gathered, as he dashed on and they still held their course, that Ukyn had some other goal in

Digitized by Google

view. But he knew also that a man, hard pressed, does not willingly turn his face up-hill, and he strove, while the ground was in their favour, not to let the distance grow between them, lest he should find himself stranded without a clue, in the half-lifted veil of morning. Prosser he simply did not count upon, and he had no intention of wasting his breath in shouting to his heavy-footed ally while so fleet a man as the Green Jiner was too far in front to be clearly seen.

Down the slopes they went, bearing a little eastward. Much of the land was pasture, cut across by the remains of ancient thorn hedges, that, untrimmed and unstrengthened for years, had become little more than rows of isolated bushes. The banks on which they stood were sunk away from their gnarled stems, and the enlacement of roots stood up from the rabbit-burrowed earth like the veins on the hands of old men. These places were no obstacles, either to pursuer or pursued, and Aythan was beginning to be afraid that they would reach the tortuous ways of the valley before he could gain upon Tom Ukyn. He feared, too, that he was making for the dingle which culminated in Crishowell village, and he had no wish to end his morning's work there, whether successfully or not.

He raced on over the moist grass, dashing through the hedges, which grew more frequent as they descended. His coat was torn by briars and his hands bled from the thorns and brushwood through which he broke his way. His knee-caps began to ache from the perpetual running down-hill, and each irregularity of the ground seemed as though it would force them from their places. And, worst of

Digitized by Google

all, Nelly's bark had ceased and he could no longer see her, though daylight was upon them. It was touching the grey edges of the world by the time his wind gave out and he came to a standstill. He had followed hard, so long as the dog was in pursuit, but, whether she had concluded that the affair was only a game, or whether Ukyn had frightened her off at last, she ran back to her master just as he stopped, panting, at the edge of the dingle, into the thickness of which the Green Jiner had plunged. The high ground across the little ravine hid the redness of sunrise as he stood at the lip of the grass land and gazed into the undergrowth which rolled from it down to the course of the brook. Its murmur came up to him, the only sound of life or movement. He took out his watch, for the light was now broad enough to show him its dial plainly. It was more than half-past seven, and he wondered, as he mopped his face disconsolately, what had become of Prosser. He determined to go down to Crishowell and find out whether Ukyn had been seen there; for people would be at work now, and he must try to trace the man he had been so humiliatingly unable to run down. He waited a few minutes, gathering himself together and fetching his breath, then, with the terrier at his heels, he also descended among the trees and was lost.

While Aythan was running himself to a standstill, Tom Ukyn, who had, from the start, been farther in front of him than he supposed, gained a good deal of ground. The man who knows the exact place he means to reach, takes, with the added advantage of semi-darkness, a shorter course can see the man who follows at a distance, and who can see

Digitized by Google

no farther into the runner's mind than he can into the country before him. Ere his pursuer was within a furlong of the dingle, the brushwood on its sides had closed on him, and he was as much obliterated from the visible landscape as though the earth had gaped open and then shut over his head. He also was sorely blown, and, while he had a mean opinion of the staying powers of any one when pitted against his own, he had an angry respect for the tenacity of his enemy. Any doubt as to that enemy's identity was disposed of the moment he saw Nelly standing rigid by the hedge he was cutting and barking herself into a frenzy; for, from the day Aythan owned her, she had followed him like his shadow, and every creature about the mountain knew her. She had made the odds against Ukyn a thousandfold heavier, for, while he might have baffled the agent by turning aside into some convenient thicket and letting him pass on in the dim light, such a trick could not be safely played on a man while a dog ran with him. He would have liked to get her into a quiet place and kill her.

He crawled through the undergrowth till he reached the bed of the brook, and, having dashed some water on his hot face, he stood listening for his enemy. Had it not been for that accursed terrier he would have turned up-stream and lain down in one of the many hollows eaten out of its banks in flood-time, trusting that Aythan would not think of taking that direction. But, as it was, he stepped into the water, picking his way as quietly as he could among the boulders, for his plan was to get through Crishowell, and, crossing the high-road where it ran parallel with the Wye, to make for

Digitized by Google

the river. If Aythan had failed to identify him he might go back in a few days to Wern; but, as he was almost sure that he had been recognised, he thought it better to get out of the neighborhood, at any rate for a time. Over the river among the slopes of Radnorshire, he could pick up something to do till times should improve. Sarah was entirely able to take care of herself; and, even had she been a less capable person, it is doubtful whether the thought of his wife's welfare would have troubled Tom Ukyn much.

Though he listened attentively he could hear no sound of Aythan, for, as a matter of fact, he also had mistaken the distance between them, and, while he was beginning his way down the bed of the Digedi, the young man had only just reached the ravine's edge and was listening too. Could some wandering ironical spirit have stood apart, and, with a vision piercing through the intervening thicknesses, have seen the two watching men, divided by so small a space, he must have smiled.

The brook's bottom grew shallower and more sandy as it neared the level, and the Green Jiner went like a shadow through the ripples. The sun of a brilliant morning was beginning to turn them into moving spangles as it broke through the trees, and he found that he could get forward more easily by walking in the midst of the flow than by forcing a way along the choked and uneven bank. Its course was tortuous, but he never left it, judging it better to be noiseless than to gain time.

Where the water gushed into the open stood the foot-bridge by the village. If he had the luck to emerge beside it unseen, he meant to take the un-

Digitized by Google

frequented bit of lane which led to Benny Bowen's cottage and slip into the orchard behind the old man's back door. In it was the remnant of a battered shed, in which he decided to lie till evening, when he might make, unmolested, through the ever-convenient darkness to the Wye.

Meantime Aythan, followed by Nelly, had gone by one of the many narrow paths into the dingle, and, crossing the Digedi, made his way up the farther bank into Crishowell lane. His intention, also, was to get to the village as quickly and secretly as possible; so, instead of approaching it by the ordinary way, he went into the fields and set off running again. By keeping straight along them he would pass under the slope on which Crishowell House stood high above him. The morning shadows lay long in the dew, and over his head, seeming higher by reason of the well of the narrow valley he traversed, the thin clouds dispersed like melting smoke. The fresh youth of day spoke to the awakened earth of effort, of hope, of the falling away of trivial and aimless things, and the air played on his face like the touch of a chill, soft hand. As he passed the spot where a streak of withering bracken pushed up through a bit of rank soil, a reminder of the more open country from which he had come, a hare flounced from her form and cantered away, her belly of one shade with the bleached sereness of the November grass. Soon he was under the windows of his old home, though the bold outward curve of the intervening land hid its walls from him.

The way from house to village, the same by which Eustace had sat when Mad Moll brought him Bar-

Digitized by Google

bara's purse, ended in a little swing-gate almost facing the foot-bridge over the brook. As Aythan drew near it he stood still, and, with his hand over Nelly's indiscreet mouth, looked through the briars to see if any one moved in the lane. Across the bridge, by Crishowell church, smoke was beginning to rise among the roofs surrounding it, and the voices of people astir were carried towards him. A cart rattled sharply some way up as though the horse had started his day with a will and was being ineffectively pulled up.

All at once the imminent monotone of the Digedi was cut by a faint splash and there emerged from the shadowing brushwood, whence its waters slid to the bridge, the Green Jiner's stealthy person. He paused, watching, before coming farther forward, his face turned from Aythan towards the village. The length of his lean cheek, with its sharp angle of jawbone hid in ragged whisker, seemed, more than ever, to give him affinity with the predatory animals, as he waited, his neck thrust forward, among the bushes.

Aythan stuffed Nelly's head inside his coat and held her close. She writhed and struggled, pushing her dirty little feet against his side, while he saw the man come out and stand under the planks of the bridge. Ukyn, after one cursory glance at the empty lane, kept his eyes fixed on the village, while, with long, silent steps, he leaped on to the path leading to Benny's cottage. The other, watching from behind the hedge, allowed him to pass the gate; for he knew that should the Green Jiner see him and run before he had left that obstacle behind

Digitized by Google

him his chances of overtaking him would not be improved.

Having successfully kept Nelly in ignorance of what was happening, he put her down, slipped through the gate, and ran on tip-toe till he came to the low wall of Benny Bowen's garden. The Green Jiner was passing through it to the orchard, and the currant bushes, now brown and dry, swished together as they closed after him; he was slinking between them like a bedraggled fox. In another moment Aythan was up on the coping, through the garden, and swinging himself over the rail on which he had once cut the ninth notch of Barbara's love-charm. But he did not think of that now; there are times when even so egotistical a thing as love knows its right place in the mind of a healthy man.

The orchard was shut in on one side by a steep, tangled bank, at the top of which was the field whose lower end had subsided in the landslip just beyond Benny's cottage. The ground had fallen a good twenty feet into the Digedi, where the water widened, skirting the village, and the portion which remained thrust out a promontory into the brook's bed. Up the earthy bank between orchard and field went Ukyn and up went Nelly after him. He was light, and, though the soil broke away in clods from under his boots, he reached the summit as his pursuer dashed up below. The dust flew into Aythan's eyes, sent down by the tread of the man above and by Nelly's scratching feet as she scrambled up, but he rushed at the bank, half blinded by the shower and laying hold of every stick or stone that offered itself to his hand. More than midway up

Digitized by Google

he caught at a stout piece of wood set like a hook into the soil; he was too hasty to see the spongy blackness of the bark where it left the ground, too much excited to notice the dank green moss that wrapped it. The rotten thing broke in his grasp and he fell backwards, rolling to the bottom.

As Aythan picked himself up and hurled himself afresh at the wall of sliding earth, Ukyn stepped on to the clean grass above. Round his legs sprang Nelly, growling and snapping at his heels. He kicked at her, missing her, and she shrank from him, to return with added persistence; then he made a swoop with his long arm and caught her by the collar, jerking her up. She swung from his hand, helpless, her paws beating the air.

He stood a moment like an image of murder, holding the dog; he owed her more than he could spare time to repay. Twice he struck her on the head with his fist, and he was raising it for another blow when Aythan appeared at the top of the bank. There was no time to be lost in the joys of revenge —not while the most determined opponent he had yet had to deal with was hard on him. But, at all costs, he must be rid of the dog. He took a couple of steps nearer to the torn ground above the landslip, high over the brook; the pleasure of breaking her neck before her master's eyes was too keen a one to be foregone. He threw her out from him and she disappeared over the edge, her eyes staring from the pressure of his fingers inside her collar.

But in so doing he almost overreached himself, for Nelly was heavier than he supposed. To recover was the work of an instant, but in that mo-

Digitized by Google

ment he was struck down and found himself sprawling upon the grass.

Aythan held him with all the strength he had. He was breathless and aching from his fall, and his head was cut, but the sight of his dog's body hurled into the air made him feel capable of anything. He knelt upon Ukyn, his hands round his throat and his teeth set, his grip tightening at every struggle made by the prostrate man. The sound of Nelly's fall had roused him to fury; it seemed to him that, were he to kneel where he was forever, it would not be too long for his patience, though it might be for his strength, for he was beginning to feel terribly giddy. The blow above his temple, got in his fall, was a heavy one; but if help did not come he would hold the Green Jiner till he was worn out. He shouted with what breath he could spare, his face turned towards the village, and Ukyn, who had been still for a few moments, made another violent effort to fling him off. He put out all his force and his head swam. Would nobody ever come?

Somebody *had* come. He looked round and saw Eustace standing a few yards off, at his back.

The present was so large to Aythan that there was no room for a thought of the past. To him at that moment Eustace was only a man, with a man's strength at his disposal.

"Come, for God's sake!" he cried. "I can't hold him much longer!"

"By George!" said Eustace, "it is Tom Ukyn!"

"Come on!" cried Aythan again, as the other did not move.

"You will strangle him, if you don't take care,"

Digitized by Google

observed his cousin, coming a pace nearer. "Egad! he looks like a trapped weasel."

"He has killed my dog!" burst out Aythan, a boyish sob at the back of his voice.

"And now you are killing him, I see," rejoined Eustace.

The Green Jiner made a violent struggle and freed himself from the hands at his throat. Aythan clung to him with all his might. Things were growing almost dark before his dazed eyes.

"Help me, man, help me!" he implored, through his clenched teeth.

"If you succeed it will be your turn next," continued Eustace, without noticing the appeal; "and it will be done at the king's expense."

A sound of despair escaped Aythan, but, as it did so, the heads and shoulders of a couple of village men appeared over an accessible place in the broken bank; for Prosser had also made for Crishowell when he realised that the chase was turning in that direction, and he had arrived in time to hear Aythan's shout.

In a few minutes they were surrounded. It looked as if the whole village population was pouring up the bank. The local constable was among the crowd which had emptied itself out of the houses, eager for sensation, and the Green Jiner was secured. He stood eyeing his captor, his pale face livid. Eustace waited to hear some explanation of the scene which had ended his early walk.

"A thousand congratulations," he said to Aythan; "and I hope thief-catching is profitable."

The other turned his back, his chest heaving.

Digitized by Google

"Why, here is the corpse!" exclaimed his cousin. "This is the most complete affair I have ever seen."

As he spoke a boy was coming towards them with something dripping in his arms, which he held out to Aythan.

"Her bean 'n dead, indeed," he said, the accents of England and Wales mixing on his tongue; "tuk her out o' the bruk, oi did, rowlin' down the water. Could n't crawl out, not 'er."

Aythan took the dog from him and laid her on the turf. Her eyes were dull and she shivered. She whimpered a little, licking his hand as he felt her over, bone by bone, and found that one of her forelegs was broken. The fact that she had landed in deep water had probably saved her life. The current ran strong just below them, and he guessed that, half-stunned by Ukyn's blows when she fell, she had failed to swim and had so been battered among the stones.

He took her up in his arms, and, pushing past Eustace, who still looked on, he drew the constable aside and gave him a few directions. He had done his work, and left it gladly in the man's hands, as he was now anxious to get under his own roof, where he might attend to Nelly. He would suffer no one to touch her but himself. His old friends among the Crishowell men pressed round, some offering to carry the dog, some insisting on going part of his homeward way with him.

"Come to Rood Farm to-morrow," he said to the boy, who had included himself in the little procession, "and I will give you two half-crowns, one for

Digitized by Google

pulling my dog out of the brook, and one for bringing her to me."

Then, as they were some way beyond the village, he bade his friends go back, and started on his long up-hill path with his burden.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVI

NEMESIS

JUSTICE, in the shape of Sir Helbert Bucknall, did not tarry after the arrest of the Green Jiner. The two months' imprisonment dealt out to the offender was the lightest manifestation of the fate hanging over Wern; for the village was doomed and the owner of the little ramshackle nest of iniquity had decided that it was to exist no more. The place was to be razed to the ground and he was coming in person to see that his order was properly carried out. Aythan was sent to get a gang of men together in Llangarth and the business of destruction was to begin without delay; not one stone was to be left upon another.

Aythan kept as much as possible out of the way, hating to speak of what was now the only subject in the mouth of every one he met. He had enough veterinary knowledge to set and bandage Nelly's leg successfully and she lay on her rug by the fireside, following him with her eyes when he was present and straining her ears when he was not. She was a creature of one idea.

The world was a black enough place to the young man during those days, for Barbara had left Tillestone to pay a visit in London. There was no

Digitized by Google

chance of meeting her either by hill or byway, and, with shrewd devilishness, his heart took the opportunity of assuring him that she had gone on purpose to avoid him. There is no end to the intolerance of a young man in love; everything in the life of the person adored must correspond to his own feeling. No outside force, no duty nor custom but must match his need exactly. The claims of others, lifelong habit, each and all must vanish like smoke or woman's natural heartlessness has undone him —he is but another victim of what has embittered the world since its creation. Aythan did not know what Eustace might have been saying of him at Tillestone, and a mixture of pride and the wrong-headedness which is the curse of lovers made him resolve to keep away from the place till he should receive some definite sign from Barbara.

The distrust he seemed to have earned from even the professedly law-abiding among his neighbours weighed on him too, while it gave him a notion of the reasons why he had failed for so long to stop the abuse he was employed to put down. Even Milman, his landlord, with whom he had ever been on the best of terms, looked at him askance; at least, so he thought. He was loath to admit the change, telling himself that solitude had put the proportion of things wrong in his mind. He thought more bitterly of Eustace too. A man who would not throw ill-feeling to the winds and help another in physical emergency was incomprehensible to him. He knew that his cousin was anything but a coward, and would, if necessary, stand up to any man alive. His inaction had meant absolute malice, and he could have bitten his own tongue

Digitized by Google

out for appealing to him. But there was the rub. In all that connected him with Eustace he seemed to have a talent for putting himself in the wrong.

He stood, one November afternoon, in the scrub by Wern village and watched the workmen he had hired ascending the hill. It was almost impossible to get anything on wheels up the steep and they paced laboriously under the picks and crowbars which they carried with them. Sir Helbert, who was in Llangarth, was to ride up later, for he vowed that he would not leave the neighbourhood until his own eyes convinced him that nothing was left standing in the place.

Aythan waited at a little distance in he path between him and the doomed houses. Some were already empty, but at some of the doors little groups had collected, for there were those among the people who refused to move until they were put out by force and others had gone on with existence undisturbed, protesting that Sir Helbert would never carry out his threats. In Ukyn's hovel, Sarah, now left in possession, was sitting at her hearth as placidly as though the fate climbing towards the village did not exist. The black pot which hung on the "sway" over the fire was full of water, and Mad Moll, who had been much with her since the Green Jiner's departure, sat opposite, her restless eyes fixed, now on the embers, now on the other woman. She felt commotion in the air though she had no knowledge of it beyond a few half-understood words her companion had spoken. But she was aware that some vague thing menaced them; and now and again she would lift her head as though listening. The "bedstick," as Sarah called

Digitized by Google

it, was in its place and her possessions were where they had always been, not because their owner had resistance in view, but because it was her policy to take nothing for granted. When it came to being bodily turned out she would go with as little disadvantage as she might. She was one who never met trouble half-way.

As the men approached the groups round the doors grew thicker, and from some houses, crockery and uncouth pieces of furniture were being brought out and laid on the muddy ground. Voices began to rise and dogs barked; a child raised a tentative wail, instantly taken up by one of its fellows.

"Go you an' look out, Moll," said Mrs. Ukyn, as purposefully still as a sitting hen.

The woman obeyed; she was so tall that she was obliged to stoop head and shoulders in passing under the lintel.

"There be a lot o' men wi' picks an' shovels," she said as she came back, her eyes wide.

"Ah—h," responded Sarah, rising up; "'ere, come in quick. I 've raked out the ashes, every bit, so there be no smoke. Take you the bedstick an' give me a 'and to get her through to the back."

There was a small inner room beyond the kitchen, used, principally, as a storehouse for the spoils of Ukyn's hands, and into it the two women thrust the bedstead, tumbling its scanty coverings after it. Sarah worked with an activity astounding in a person of her size, and when every sign of humanity was cleared from the wretched dwelling-room she sprinkled the dying embers with water from the pot. The mud floor of the hovel absorbed the drops as though it were a sponge. There was

Digitized by Google

scarcely space in the inner room for anything but the lumber with which they had filled it, but Sarah hauled her companion in after her and shut the door behind them. Then she sat squarely down on the bedstead, awaiting events. She argued shrewdly that the inhabited cottages would be the first to fall and that she might, by subtlety, buy herself shelter for at least another night. Moll stood by, puzzled and silent.

Unusual sounds were rising outside. She could hear Aythan's unmistakable voice among the tones of the men and the shrill protests of women and domestic animals. Heavy things were being dragged about and the strokes of pickaxes, isolated at first, were growing ominously regular. Her own house stood farther from the path than did any of the others, and, from the tiny window almost on a level with her head, nothing could be seen. Her position was far from being a cheerful one, but there was no sign of that fact upon the coloured expanse of her face. Its lines of expression turned as confidently upward as though she had been some large and humorous idol sitting expectant of a party of worshippers.

Meanwhile, Sir Helbert Bucknall was mounting the hill on his cob. He could see, as he neared Wern, the dust rising in sudden clouds from the falling of thatch and stones, and there struck on his ear the dull thudding of the picks. At the top of the final steep was Aythan, a little apart from the crowd, and the old man dismounted at his side, throwing the reins to a servant who followed him. There were few present who had seen their landlord in the flesh, and his arrival was hardly noticed.

Digitized by Google

He was shorter than Aythan and he stood by him for some time in silence, looking covertly at him. He was considering his agent from a new point of view.

"You ran that man Ukyn down in the open, I'm told," he began at last.

"Hardly that, sir," replied Aythan. "An accident helped me to get hold of him. He meddled with my dog."

Sir Helbert's mouth tightened at one corner as though he had meant to smile, but thought better of it.

"And I suppose that you set out before daylight by accident and hunted him into Crishowell by mistake?" rejoined he, with another twitch.

"I never hoped to succeed so easily. But your letter was so plain that I made up my mind to do it, if I could."

"Ha—I said you were n't earning your money, did n't I? I suppose that hurt my young gentleman's pride? Well, I retract; for I believe your work 's worth more than I thought. And I 'll give you a little more, too."

"Thank you, sir," said Aythan. "I think we will hold to our arrangement."

There was no expression in his face as he looked at his employer.

Sir Helbert's grim geniality died away and he turned his back.

It is never a pleasant experience to take another's point of view for granted only to find it tossed aside, and the old man's former opinion of Aythan as a "damned impudent young dog" returned more vividly. What youth remained in his heart had

Digitized by Google

been stirred by the exaggerated account he had heard of his agent's prowess in catching Ukyn, and he had made up his mind that he was a man worth keeping in his service. Though his god was his pocket he felt that it would pay him to back his decision substantially. He was furious as he walked away towards the houses.

He stood watching one on which the men were at work till a clatter of rubble and unpointed stone falling about his feet almost choked him with dust. Strolling on to the farther end of the hamlet he passed close to an apparently deserted cottage and glanced through its half-opened door at the mud floor on which the ashes of a dead fire were scattered. A black pot lay overturned in a corner and the damp stains of spilt water added to the general suggestion of hurried flitting. He made a careless thrust at the window with his walking-stick, smiling as the glass splintered under the blow and turning the angle of the hovel with leisurely ill-humour. There being no buildings farther on, he was obliged to make the circle of the cottage and retrace his steps, for he meant to leave Wern only when dusk should stop the work of razing it. He was near enough to the wall to be taken aback at finding a human countenance on the inner side of it at an exact level with his own. The head was set as neatly in the square, unglazed aperture close to his shoulder as a picture is set in a frame; it looked like a portrait in a sunk mount. The eyes in the round female face met his own with an unconcern which annoyed him. He paused opposite to it, frowning at it like a disapproving spectator at a Punch and Judy show and opening his lips to speak.

Digitized by Google

He was checked by the uneasy, uncustomary feeling that being obliged to address a head alone brought upon him; but he was saved from this embarrassment by the very cause of it.

Sarah Ukyn was no wiser than her neighbours, and it did not enter her mind that the round-shouldered old man glowering outside could be her landlord. Concealment was now impossible, but equanimity remained.

"Who be you?" she inquired simply.

"Dammy, I 'm Sir Helbert Bucknall," returned the other, "and I 've come to put an end to this den of thieves. Out you go, my good woman, and be done with it."

"Not you," said Sarah, a smile of indulgent incredulity spreading on her face.

Sir Helbert swallowed once or twice and struck his stick into the earth.

"*You?*" continued the head in the window derisively. "Nonsense! Ould Bucknall be a gentleman. Nasty ould varmint they do say, too."

"I tell you I am here!" shouted Sir Helbert; "and damn me if I leave before I see you turned out!"

"An' you 've no business 'ere too," rejoined Sarah with the air of one who has closed a subject.

To contend for one's identity is never a dignified thing to do, but Sir Helbert was so little accustomed to being thwarted that all composure went from him. Self-restraint was no great virtue of his, and what little he had was swept away on a torrent of contemptuous anger. He threatened, he proclaimed, he commanded; and, all the while, the

Digitized by Google

framed-in head at the window looked on him with a cheerful toleration dreadful to endure.

"Give over, now, do," said Mrs. Ukyn, in the first pause; "there be no manner o' use to tell me lies. *You're* no gentleman. I've never been a mile from a pig's trough, but I do know that, sure enough."

"You'll find out who I am when the house comes down about your ears," bawled Sir Helbert over his shoulder as he hurried, with a crimson face, from the vicinity of the window towards Aythan. "Mr. Waring, tell the men to go over to that farthest house—keep them at it. If that dog-hole is n't down by to-night and the woman inside it put out, I'll dismiss them, every one. They can fire the thatch if they like!"

At these words, shouted as they were, and at the confusion they produced, the Wern people awoke to the fact that their destroyer was among them. They drew together, keeping themselves aloof from Aythan and the old man, while the workmen, obeying the loud directions of Sir Helbert, advanced on Ukyn's cottage.

Moll, who had stood bewildered while the dispute was carried on through the window, was in the front room when the men planted their ladders and began to tear down the thatch. Sarah knew that her position was no longer tenable, and that she must hasten to get what property she had out of the place if she wished to save it; luck had been against her even in the matter of one more night's shelter and the two began to push the bedstead back by the way it had come, there being no outer door to the little room. At the sound of voices on the roof and the falling of broken beams the crazy

Digitized by Google

woman's hawk eyes became fixed. She stood stock still, listening.

"They be breaking down the house!" she exclaimed, dropping the chair she carried.

"Don't stand to gape, or it'll be down afore we do get them things out!" cried Sarah, whose practical mind was dealing with necessity. "You may be glad you've got a roof o' your own to-night, for it's more than I'll have in another 'alf-hour."

But Moll's brain could not work so quickly, and she stood dismayed, looking at the speaker.

"Go on, you foondy woman!" cried Mrs. Ukyn; "a little 'elp 's worth a lot o' pity!"

As she spoke the door was pulled wide open and a man stood on the threshold with a tinder-box in his hand.

"Light it from the inside!" cried Sir Helbert; "that'll smoke the vermin out!"

"There's no need for that," said Aythan, pushing himself forward and looking in. "Come, Sarah Ukyn, be quick—I'll help you to pull your things out."

He would have laid hold of the bundle she was dragging but she waved him off. Her placid face was, for once, convulsed, and her eyes gleamed.

"Don't you touch nothin' o' mine!" she shouted. "You've done bad enough by Tom Ukyn an' me—don't want never to see ye again, I don't. There's plenty other work for ye to do, driving poor men into gaol!"

Her voice was raised and the epithets with which she ended her sentence rang out into the crowd surrounding the door. A burst of laughter followed.

"Smoke her out!" cried Sir Helbert again.

Digitized by Google

"Come on, woman, come on, there's no time to be lost!" exclaimed Aythan as a little thread of smoke crept out above the lintel.

She pushed past him, dragging her bundle after her into the air. A jet of flame ran crackling up the sharp slant of thatch, and Moll, who had stood like a stone figure in the turmoil, followed her, rushing into the midst of the bystanders. Fire terrified her.

The flame had taken good hold, and, as the faint wind that stirred the advancing afternoon caught it, it climbed with a subdued roar to the roof-tree. Smoke and sparks drove the workmen back from the building, and Moll and Sarah, drawn together as though for mutual protection, stayed side by side in front of the onlookers, watching the rotten timbers subside into an empty shell of walls. Burning pieces of soot that had lurked, unswept, in the ancient chimney were carried on the air over their heads and sailed about in the reek, some lighting on Mrs. Ukyn's clothes. But she took no heed. A man standing near her crushed out one with his hand, pointing at the charred circle it had eaten in her shawl. She looked on his good offices with indifference.

"No matter; a galloping 'orse 'll see no 'ole in it," she observed.

When evening was drawing in and the workmen put away their tools the half-demolished walls of Ukyn's house stood blackened and cold. The four or five hovels which remained, emptied of their human as well as of their inanimate contents, waited like condemned criminals for the execution of the morrow. Sir Helbert was in his saddle, his horse's

Digitized by Google

head towards Llangarth, when Sarah, who had decided to take shelter for the night with Mad Moll, started for Crishowell.

Moll sent a lowering glance at Aythan as they passed him in the dusk. She had always connected him with evil in her mind. Had not Eustace, as he sent her to find out where he lived, seemed to be in fear of him? She remembered the day when she stood by the carriage on the Crishowell road and he promised her another groat for the information. She had not forgotten the words he had impressed upon her; for she forgot nothing that came from his lips. And Sarah hated Aythan too. Had he not sent Ukyn to prison? Had he not burned her house?

Aythan turned towards her when she began to follow her friend; she seemed to him like the very spirit of desolation as she passed by the gaunt walls. The outlines of the ruined place were growing distorted, monstrous, in the greyness of the November twilight.

Suddenly she cried to him aloud.

"You be a bad man!—a bad man!" she called. The echo of her fierce voice rang in his ears as she descended the hill.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVII

THE TOILS

THE Green Jiner's wife, who could, to use her own phrase, "thrive where the crows do starve," had succeeded in finding shelter in Crishowell, and there was something ironical in the fact that, in spite of her resourceful character, she owed this good fortune mainly to the puzzle-witted creature whom she patronised. One thing was nearly as firmly rooted in Mad Moll's mind as her adoration for Eustace, and that was her awed sense of Aythan's wickedness. He was a monster to her, a wanton oppressor, and, after the destruction of Wern, she had an almost superstitious belief in his power for evil. She unreservedly laid at his door all the trouble she had seen. To tell Eustace of it seemed to be the best way of protecting herself and her neighbours from further tyrannies; and Sarah encouraged the vague idea, her discerning eye seeing possible relief from Crishowell House. If Moll made the story piteous enough, it might be possible to glean some advantage from it. The two women were not long in waylaying him as he waited, one afternoon, near the village for Hester to join him in a walk.

He stood tapping his boot with the cane he car-

Digitized by Google

ried as the tall woman poured out her history of the end of Wern village. He had heard it all before, but, though he knew that his cousin had no real concern in it, he listened to Moll, watching the lights of fear and anger playing on her face with a certain interest. Sarah looked on, adding comments whose pungency made him smile.

"And so you have been living with Moll these last days?" he said, more to add another link to a conversation which amused him than because he had any interest in Sarah's affairs.

"Yes, livin'; my mouth lives under her roof, but the pity is it can't live *on* it. The king 's feedin' Ukyn, sure enough, but 'e don't take no notice o' me. An' a bit more roof over me would do me no 'arm, neither."

"Kings are difficult people to deal with, Mrs. Ukyn."

"So 's men. An' gentlemen 's worse. An', by the Lawk!" exclaimed Sarah, "ould Bucknall 's worst of all. I tuk 'im for a common man, first, an' after he 'd spoken a bit I tuk 'im for Satan."

Eustace was enjoying himself; he looked at her with an expression of so much approval that she felt the stirring of opportunity.

"A bit o' work about Crishowell House would be the thing for me," she observed. "I could make a little pinching bit then, and' not be troubling Moll."

"She has been very kind to you," he replied hastily. He did not want to create responsibility for himself.

"True, indeed, sir. 'I must speak well of the bridge as carried me over,' as the ould man said.

Digitized by Google

I'd speak well o' you, too, if you'd give me the chance to."

And she drew the back of her large hand across her mouth. The gesture had expectancy in it.

"I can do nothing," rejoined Eustace. "It is no business of mine. Mrs. Bridges is the person who settles such things."

"Speak you a word to her for me, sir. A lady like her 'll listen to a fine young gentleman when her won't mind no one else. It's 'er own flesh an' blood that's been the ruin o' Tom Ukyn, too."

Eustace was becoming a little annoyed and inclined to think the entertainment of Sarah's society too dearly bought. They were standing in the village lane near its junction with the road, and, as she spoke, Hester Bridges came round the corner. She started slightly at seeing Moll.

Now, as she appeared in the country road beside these two rough women of toil, she looked more completely apart from her surroundings than usual. Even in a crowd composed of people of her own class she would have been difficult to overlook, not by reason of detachment, but because of an intangible difference, and here, the effect she made was doubled. Rich dress appealed to her, looking suitable to her unversatile personality in all circumstances. Moll, standing silent, habitually dumb when another spoke, drew farther away, and even Mrs. Ukyn was overawed for a moment.

Hester inclined her head. She smiled so seldom that her civility was apt to seem colder than it actually was.

"Speak you for me, sir," continued Sarah, recovering her tongue and nudging Eustace with

Digitized by Google

dreadful familiarity. Hester looked inquiringly from one to the other.

"What do you want?" she asked, standing nearer to Eustace as though he were a protection.

"I were saying to the gentleman 'ere as I do need work to live. Turned out o' my four walls I am, an' it 's your own flesh an' blood as be to blame for it."

Something defensive had crept into her manner as she addressed one of her own sex.

Hester was puzzled. She had gone so little about the country that she knew none of its inhabitants except certain of her own labourers.

"She is Tom Ukyn's wife," explained Eustace.

"But what does she mean by my own flesh and blood?" said Hester.

"'T were Master Aythan—'im as I knew when he were a little lump of a boy—he got Tom into trouble."

The colour rose on Hester's face.

"He is not my flesh and blood," she said quickly; "you are talking nonsense, woman."

"Ah, he be a bad man!" exclaimed Moll, roused from her silence; "he turned Sarah from her home."

Her voice brought back to Hester something of the repulsion she had felt when she sat with Eustace in the chaise and heard her speak for the first time.

"He turned Sarah from her home," said Moll again, more loudly. "He can't turn you away, you be too grand a lady, but we poor folk, we be afeared o' him."

Hester did not reply. There was that about the

Digitized by Google

crazy woman which made her feel cold. Why must even this distraught creature remind her of things she was trying to forget?

"Be you afeared o' him, too?" asked Moll, struck by her expression and coming a step nearer.

"Hold your tongue, for Heaven's sake!" exclaimed Eustace roughly, as Hester shrank back.

He moved on, drawing his companion with him. But Mrs. Ukyn had no intention of losing her chances.

"Be off, Moll!" she cried, giving her friend a push. "And if your ladyship will listen to a poor woman an' give me a bit o' work, I'll take care she don't trouble you no more. Get away wi' ye!" she shouted to Moll, who was turning obediently homewards.

"But what do you want?" inquired Hester with resigned irritation.

"I do want a roof to cover me an' a bit o' somethin' to put into me. A powerful good worker I be, too—Master Aythan did know that, though he did turn agin' me."

For Hester there was a morbid fascination about Aythan's name. In spite of her outward sophistication she had that craving which, in the uneducated, is the craving for horror. It was the intensity of her feeling against the young man which made her greedy of every detail concerning him.

"What has he done to you?" she asked, searching Sarah's face. Her hands were pressed together inside the muff she carried.

"'E got Ukyn put in prison. Chased 'im on the mountain like a dog chasin' sheep. Tom's throat were bleedin' when they got him, and they do say

Digitized by Google

in Crishowell that he 'd 'a been a dead man if they had n't stopped it an' tuk' him away. And 't was him got over ould Bucknall an' made him finish wi' Wern. A good contriver is an early riser, they say, an' he 's a good contriver agin' poor folk like we. Up at all hours, he was, spyin' round Wern. 'E come into my cottage, too, when the men was breaking it down over the top o' me. 'Come,' says he, 'I 'll 'elp ye out wi' they things,' but I would n't let him so much as lay a finger on the ould noodle o' a bedstick I were pullin' out behind me, wi' they 'ands o' his that had been tryin' to twist poor Tom's neck! There be devils in this world, sure enough, ma'am, an' 'e 's one o' them."

Hester's face was a study during this outburst. She hung upon the woman's crowding words as though they had been some inspired revelation. The veil which enwrapped her, protecting her beautiful skin from the chill wind, shrouded the expressions that passed over her face as she listened, her head a little forward, her figure tense, to the jumble of truth and lies pouring from Sarah's lips. Eustace watched her. He had rarely seen her reveal herself so much. She had even forgotten his presence.

"An' 'ere be I," continued Sarah, "got nothin' to keep myself, thanks be to him."

She ceased, seeing a look in the eyes behind the veil which told her that, for some reason, their owner was ranging herself beside her in sympathy. A common hatred is a quickly-riveted bond.

"But what sort of work can you do?" asked Hester, in her controlled voice. "I believe there is a great deal of rough garden work to be done, now

Digitized by Google

that the leaves have fallen. Perhaps I could give you some—in fact I will. You can come at the beginning of the week, on Monday."

Every line of Sarah's face turned upwards. "I trod on a lucky stone when I come over the bruk to-day!" she exclaimed.

Hester took Eustace's arm and turned away; he felt her hand trembling against his side.

"I think I shall let her go into that old cottage in the wood beyond the house," said she; "it is standing empty."

Whenever Hester Bridges displayed any feeling she inspired Eustace with an apprehension so elusive that he could hardly define it, and he walked on rather moodily beside her. They had lived very peacefully during the last few weeks, for, Barbara being away from home, he had gone less often to Tillestone. But Barbara was coming back.

He had almost come to hate Hester. The half-hearted attachment in which pleasure and profit were so nicely balanced had been well enough once, but had now become impossible. He looked round at her, walking beside him, her hand on his arm, and the thought of what was going on in his own heart, so near to that hand, made him ill at ease. There was enough shame in Eustace to give him a sense of his own perfidy, and he resented that sense because it was forcing him to accept a truth which life was only just beginning to teach him. He was finding out that he could not always answer for himself.

Looking back on his own boldness and on the light way in which he had hoped for passing amusement from a flirtation with Barbara Troup, he mar-

Digitized by Google

velled; for his feet were entangled in the whirl of his own passions and he could find no escape. Now that she had roused them he was beginning to see the woman at his side in a different light. The faint glamour with which he had managed to invest her was gone, and another influence was taking its place. Sometimes it was borne in on Eustace that that influence was not unlike horror. He had never yet supposed that intangible things could be so strong.

There had been no flirtation with Barbara, and it chafed him to suspect that the idea of him as a lover did not enter her mind. Though she had made herself consistently charming, he did not know how he stood with her. All that he was certain of was that he could not do without her, and his desire for her had become so intense that Hester's proximity was scarcely endurable. The passionlessness of his feeling for Hester, that lack which had made a life of decorum under one roof with her possible in their circumstances, was turning into something which approached antipathy.

Autumn had brought many things to Eustace; his face had grown more lined, thinner, harder; and the determination to hide what was in his mind made him increase rather than lessen the small attentions which were so much to Hester, but which grew daily more unnatural to himself. The strain of keeping up the farce of which he wearied told on him, and, if his light talk flowed on in the same channels, it was mainly his abiding love of paradox, his sense of an incongruity which he alone understood, that enabled him to play his part. Also, he was beginning, faintly, to despise

Digitized by Google

himself. He was no self-deceiver, and he did nothing with his eyes shut; it was part of his curse, now, that he could put the right name to his own conduct. It was a strange thing that he should be ashamed; he who had hitherto ridden smiling above such feelings; but fear is a hard master, and it was fear alone, fear of himself, fear of the unexpected, fear of something dormant in Hester that had, once or twice, peeped at him out of her eyes, which had broken the breach and let shame enter his heart. All his life he had trusted himself, but his trust was dying.

Never had Hester allowed his dislike of Aythan one moment's peace. The fires of jealousy which tormented him when he suspected he had Aythan for a rival needed no stirring, but she stirred them until they burned him to the bone. The thoughts of these two people seemed condemned to play round the man they hated, whether they would or no. And it was the flame which she fanned that had lighted him down the iguoble path he followed; for he had, in the weeks before Barbara went away, deliberately set Moll to spy upon his cousin.

His jealousy had driven him a long way and goaded him cruelly before he put the weakness of his self-appointed servant to a task which, had she been in her right senses, she would have been the last to undertake. Honesty was fast anchored amid the shifting wreckage of Moll's mind, and her appearance, so near to being a noble one, was a true symbol of what lay behind it. To her, the two cousins had become, practically, modifications of God and the devil. One was the embodiment of exalted benevolence, a person whose good faith and

Digitized by Google

virtue were as firmly rooted as the great mountain that watched, year in, year out, the drama of their lives; the other malignant, the enemy of the poor. They were at strife, too; why, she could not and did not seek to understand. Fitful gleams of insight would make Moll quick to read the faces about her; and, on the day when the two men had walked with her from Llangarth, she had unconsciously taken for granted something antagonistic below the surface of their looks and words. And the solemnity of Eustace's injunction to secrecy when he sent her to find out Aythan's whereabouts had deepened the impression. She had never forgotten it. "If any one knew I had sent you, some harm might happen to me." The thought appalled Moll; but it was set in her mind, pointing out where the unknown evil lay, like the arm of a signpost at cross-roads.

Eustace had sent her on so many errands to the neighbourhood of Rood church that she now accepted the importance, to him, of knowing everything that Aythan did; and, without being questioned, she would pour out the account of all she could see or hear of his cousin. In this way he had come by the knowledge he had burned and agonised to obtain and was selling his self-respect for; thus he had found out how often—and it was very often—Aythan went to Tillestone. He knew that Aythan would meet and ride with Barbara, he knew that he would stand watching the distant track which ran under the hill; and he had discovered enough to destroy the last remnant of his own peace and to make himself the most miserable man alive.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. TROUP'S VISITORS

EUSTACE rode towards Tillestone in the pale winter sunlight of Christmas Eve. Barbara had returned dutifully to spend with her father a festival the occurrence of which he was unlikely to notice, and the young man was hastening to see her and drugging his fretted heart with the blessed anticipation of being near her. He looked an ideal lover to casual eyes; any stranger, watching him and learning that the lady of his desire would none of him, might well be pardoned for thinking that she justly earned old-maidhood. He did not allow himself to remember, as he went, that now there was only a couple of weeks between him and the end of the six months' silence he had agreed upon with Hester.

In January their engagement was to be announced publicly. He would cease to be a free man, even in name; and, knowing this, he yet had not the strength to stay away from Tillestone. The grim good sense that kept Aythan from cursing his luck had been denied him and he blamed Providence hotly for its misuse of him. Why had he not seen Barbara emerge, soft and fresh, from the recesses of Richard's Barn a bare month earlier?

Crishowell House and all belonging to it might then have been swallowed by the earth for all he cared. He would even have worked for her. He knew enough of Mr. Troup to be certain that any one with the prospect of making the most moderate living would be welcome, could he but take the girl off his hands, and he saw that he stood well with Mr. Troup. He flattered himself that there would have been no question of Aythan. The thought of breaking with Hester had entered his mind, but he had lacked courage to put it into effect, unsupported by any pledge from Barbara. He did not suspect that she disliked him, but there was such a thing as falling between two stools. He had gone over his own position again and again, seeing no way out of the net in which he was taken. He did not know what to think nor what to do—he could only suffer, and, in an indefinite way, nurse a forlorn hope, such as a condemned criminal might have, for a reprieve.

In this humour he cantered on. The earth was wet with melted white frost and smelt strong of water and roots. Such birds as he saw were probing it industriously, making the most of chances which might not be theirs to-morrow. The pungent breath of the soil stirred his blood; to-day belonged to him, even as it did to the rooks and starlings. What lay before him he knew not, and what lay behind he would forget, at least, temporarily.

He dismounted at the doorstep to hear that Mr. Troup was ill. He was confined to his room with a sore throat, the butler said, and had been ordered to see no one. It was not the custom of those days for young men to be received alone by girls, but

Digitized by Google

Eustace's mood was insistent. It was tuned to an absolute defying of profit and loss in the arrangements of life, and he did not care what any one thought about anything. He would have demanded to see Barbara under all circumstances, and his wits were sufficiently at his service to make him assure the man that nothing could set his mind at rest but a report on his master's health from Miss Troup herself. He looked up from the card on which he was writing civilities to find Barbara standing before him.

Her father had seen him from the window and insisted upon his coming in. "He is too hoarse to speak, Mr. Waring," said she; "but I am to beg you to send Columbine to the stables and to come in and rest."

Her recollection of his mare's name sent a thrill of pleasure through him and he followed her, smiling, across the hall.

From the safe vantage of his bedroom Clarence Troup was all vicarious hospitality. His throat was much better, but he was deep in a scarce and highly flavoured volume of early eighteenth-century memoirs which had just been sent him and which he would not have put down to receive his reigning Majesty George the Fourth. Eustace must have a glass of wine and his horse a feed, and he must understand what a disappointment it was to the invalid not to be permitted to see him. Barbara's eyes danced. Her father's small hypocrisies amused her, though she was well accustomed to them. She drew a piteous picture of the suffering above their heads which Eustace scarcely heeded; he was extremely glad that his friend was ill.

Digitized by Google

A dusky richness of colour filled Tillestone Court. There was much panelling in the place and the servants had been at work decorating in honour of the morrow. The house was warm with wood fires, and, as he sat by the hearth with Barbara, Eustace leaned back in his chair and let the mellow atmosphere enwrap him. His companion had not been out all day, one thing and another having kept her employed. Cookery was of overwhelming importance to Mr. Troup, and he settled everything connected with it himself, distrusting her. But to-day, being allowed nothing he liked by the doctor, he had lost his interest in dinner and had left her to deal with every branch of domestic supply. She had spent a distracted morning and was sincerely thankful to see Eustace, who would, at least, take her mind from beef and mutton. She was almost cordial; after all, was it his fault that he was not Aythan?

They drew their chairs to the fire in the morning-room. He likened her in this sombre place to a red rose, dew-laden, and glowing in the shadow; it was not, perhaps, a very original simile; but the fact that a thing has been said before does not prevent it from being true, and he was not far wrong. Her lips, pouting a little and touched by the fire-light, were just parted and the russet that lurked in her hair seemed drawn out by the warmth of the room. She held one hand towards the blaze, and, above her wrist, tanned faintly by the outdoor life she loved, her arm was as white as cream. He longed to pour his desperate story out to her, throwing himself on her pity, to tell her that, in exchange for one word of hope from her, he was prepared to

Digitized by Google

pitch Hester, his prospects and his integrity, to the winds and to work for her for the rest of his days. He could not really suppose that she loved Aythan, but, surely, there was no reason why she should not be brought to love himself. If only there were more time! If only Hester did not stand so close to him with the chain in her hand, a chain which he would have to drag for life! It was his misfortune, too, that Barbara had been away and that so much time in which he might have drawn her nearer to him had been lost. He had dallied too long; his heart had sprung its incredible forces upon him too late.

She was in her most attractive humour; and her gratitude at the relief he brought to the monotony of her day made her spirits, always ready to rise, bound upwards. She was inclined to see everything, including her companion, in its best light. But though he found her sympathetic, irresistible, this afternoon, as he had never done before, he was determined to keep his head cool, knowing that, without some clue to her real feelings, he could not burn his boats. But he was not going to let these things interfere with his enjoyment if he could help it. He would thrust his perplexities behind him and the thought of his dwindling freedom. With Barbara sitting not three yards away the present was good enough for him.

But even that philosophic comfort, snatched, so to speak, at the point of the bayonet, was not to be left to him long, for it fled with the sound of wheels in the drive. He rose with an impatience which he could not control, and was standing on the hearth-rug when Mr. Troup's valet came in with a message from upstairs.

Digitized by Google

Mr. Troup had seen from his window Sir Helbert Bucknall coming up to the house in a chaise; though he had never met the old man it was from him that he had bought Tillestone Court, and he had heard enough of the claret-coloured carriage and gray horses by which he was recognisable to know who was his invader. Such a chance of getting through a probably uncongenial visit by proxy was too good to be missed and he pealed the bell and sent word to his daughter that he wished her to receive Sir Helbert on his behalf. She was to tell him how deeply he regretted the foregone pleasure of making his acquaintance. Eustace swore below his breath.

Sir Helbert was ushered in. Barbara looked at him with interest; he was Aythan's master, and for that reason she was eager to see him. She had heard every detail of the demolishing of Wern, for the sensational tale of its fall rejoiced the rural heart and made the younger people feel that their grandparents, those chartered tradition-mongers, had no longer the pull over them while they could cap their well-worn marvels so luridly.

Sir Helbert Bucknall could be civil with his own kind when it suited him. He had no great wish to meet Mr. Troup and he thought it a good deal pleasanter to be received by a blooming young woman who seemed capable of interests outside herself than by a man he had heard spoken of as "an effeminate picture-fancier." He had heard, too, that Clarence Troup did not know the stock of a gun from the barrel. He was so much in the humour for humanity as to observe, with acid amusement, that the good-looking young fellow, introduced by Bar-

Digitized by Google

bara as Mr. Eustace Waring, was horribly annoyed by his presence.

He had sat some little time when, at a break in the conversation, he turned to him.

"And may I ask how nearly my agent, Mr. Waring, is related to you?" he began abruptly.

"He is my first cousin."

"Indeed. Then I hope, sir, that you are a less independent and more conciliating person to deal with than he is."

And Sir Helbert, who was not so tall as Eustace, glowered up at him from under his white eyebrows.

Eustace raised his own.

"We thought, sir, that you had a rough diamond on your hands when we heard you had employed him. He is scarcely the man for a responsible post. I should not keep him a day, myself."

"So you all quarrelled, eh?" said Sir Helbert, who considered himself a privileged person, though none knew on what grounds.

"If you call it quarrelling when one man chooses to take offence, we did," replied Eustace. "Mrs. Bridges had to endure a great deal."

A note of superiority in his voice knocked up disagreeably against Sir Helbert.

"There are a good many versions afloat in this neighbourhood," he said, with a twitch of his mouth.

"And that will always be so while there are inquisitive people to listen to them," rejoined the other. "It is merely demand and supply."

Barbara sat breathless; she had never been so near the heart of the matter before. She wondered whether Eustace would call her interest inquisitive.

Digitized by Google

To herself she was beginning to admit it as a vital one. She shaded her face with the little painted fire-screen in her hand that the two men should not see her expression.

Sir Helbert was becoming annoyed by Eustace's coolness, but he controlled himself.

"I used to know Matthew Bridges once, for I was at Shrewsbury school with him as a boy. He adopted you both, I heard," he observed bluntly.

"I am too young to remember," replied Eustace, throwing a volume of serious innocence into his eyes. Sir Helbert did not know what to make of this speech. He was intensely provincial, and too much accustomed to the deference of a small circle from which he rarely emerged to take in its absolute flippancy. At any other moment Barbara would have laughed secretly; but the way the young man had spoken of Aythan had roused against him that feeling which, this afternoon, she had allowed to sleep. She was determined to show nothing of what she felt; and as, since the beginning of the conversation, both her companions had become hateful to her, she was, no doubt, wise.

"In any case I am too old to be dictated to by whipper-snappers!" exclaimed Sir Helbert, careless of which member of an obnoxious family he attacked. "He has the effrontery to suppose no one understands farming but himself and to think farmhouses good enough for me to own not good enough for him to look after. If I spent all that an upstart boy like himself thinks necessary there'd be nothing left to pay his valuable services with. I told him that and he said he did n't care. You

Digitized by Google

young men are very different to what you were in my day."

"I fancy you will not be troubled long with him, sir," observed Eustace. "My cousin is not fond of plain speaking when it comes from other people, though, unluckily, we did not realise that until it was too late. A mere trifle made him leave Crishowell."

He was making the most of his audience. He was not sorry that Barbara should hear his opinion while chance made her, perforce, a listener. And he could not see her face behind the painted toy she was twirling in her fingers.

Mentally, Sir Helbert was blown this way and that. He had been furious with Aythan since the day he had refused his offer of a larger salary, and an uneasy feeling that stirred in his remnant of conscience when his agent spoke of the pestilent state of his farmhouses made his temper no better. He longed to abuse him but was afraid, by so doing, of agreeing with Eustace, whose manner woke all the contrariness of his nature.

"Waring's a determined fellow, all the same," he said at last. "Ukyn would never have been caught but for him. I told him so, too."

"That would enchant him!" exclaimed Eustace. "He will value himself as a man of action more than ever."

Barbara's eyes blazed behind her screen. One of the many things she liked in Aythan was his modesty. It was all she could do not to speak; but she held her peace.

"I cannot help laughing when I think what a primitive pair Aythan and that venerable Tartar

Digitized by Google

must make!" exclaimed Eustace when the door had closed behind Sir Helbert. "How I should like to see them together! I can imagine them throwing turnips at each other over a hedge."

"He is detestable," said the girl shortly. "All malicious people are."

The unseen Mr. Troup, who played a kind of chorus to the drama going on below him, here interrupted again; he had finished his memoirs and was beginning to grow weary of his room. He would consider it a great favour if Mr. Waring would come up-stairs; so said his valet, appearing in the room as Sir Helbert's claret-coloured chaise rolled away.

Barbara held her feelings back until she was alone. She went to the window and looked out into the early dusk that was creeping round the house. Her hands were tightly clenched, and she told herself that never again—never willingly, at least—would she speak to Eustace Waring. She had never liked him and now that she had seen him in his true colours she found those colours more hateful than she supposed. She was doubly certain that some foul play had driven Aythan from Crishowell, and she attributed it, unreservedly, and with the crude reasoning of youth, to him. Ah! how she hated him! She loathed his face, his expression, his voice—everything about him. She marvelled that she had been able to tolerate him while that distrust, now so well justified, was in her heart. Her eyes glittered with anger as she threw on a cloak and went out. She would not run the risk of meeting him again.

Fearing that she might be seen she walked round

Digitized by Google

to the back of the house. It was not cold and she went into an arbour formed by a large clipped yew-bush standing at the side of the path, its thick roof and circular walls black against the dusk. She chose this place because it was on the way to the stables, and, from the little bench within it, she would see the servant pass to order Eustace's horse. When he had gone by she intended to slip out and go into the house by the back door and so up the back staircase to her own room. She had not taken refuge there at once lest she should be summoned by her father before the young man took his leave.

About ten minutes had gone by when she heard a man's step upon the path. She was too much agitated to notice that, instead of emerging from the back door, the footfall came round the angle of the house. The arbour was shallow and she knew that the man must go by not three yards from her, so she sat like a stone, waiting till he should have passed the mouth of her retreat.

People who seek to elude others by getting into dark places are sometimes very simple; for, no sooner have their eyes grown accustomed to the gloom than they cease to believe themselves safe, crediting the pair in the light with the faculties acquired by their own. Barbara was no wiser as she sat in the darkness of the yew-bush. When Eustace, who, instead of sending a servant, had gone to fetch his mare himself, passed across the light arch before her, she started and drew her breath so sharply that he stopped and turned, facing her.

"Barbara!" he said, almost under his breath as he entered the arbour. He forgot that she could not have supposed he would come by, and, for one

Digitized by Google

delirious moment, it flashed on him that she was waiting there to meet him. An inarticulate sound broke from her lips as she tried to rush out of the green cage. He caught her by the hand. The touch of it sent what reason and sense he had schooled himself to possess that afternoon flying.

"Barbara!" he exclaimed; "dearest Barbara!"

"Let me go!" she cried, trying to wrench her hand free.

"Stay a moment," he begged, holding it fast, while, with the other, he sought to draw her towards him.

"Let me go, sir, this instant!" she demanded, a note of fierceness dominating the distress in her tone. Her strong fingers were round his wrist, holding his arm back. He paid no heed.

"But, Barbara, I love you more than anything on earth! You cannot get rid of me—you shall not! Can't you understand what it has been to me to-day to sit there beside you and say nothing? You *shall* love me, do you hear? There is no use in struggling—you shall not go till you hear me out. I love you and I mean to love you whether you will or no—I cannot help it. Oh, Barbara! you are so beautiful!"

His voice dropped as he said these last words and he made another effort to draw her closer. But she stood her ground, thrusting him from her with all her force. Strong as he was, he could not hold her without hurting her.

"I hate you," she said.

"Barbara—" he began again.

"Listen!" she cried; "I detest you! I hate you more than any one living. There is no one in the

Digitized by Google

world I despise as I do you. Once I leave this place no power shall ever make me speak to you again."

Eustace was petrified. For a moment he was speechless.

"But why, why—" he began at last.

"Hush!" she exclaimed. "You have compelled me to stay here against my will and so you shall hear the truth. If there were no other man in the world and I had to die or marry you I would die—I hate you so. That is enough, surely. And when I heard you speak of—of Aythan as you did to-day, I knew how mean, how heartless you were. I guessed it, always—but I have seen it now!"

He dropped her hand as though it were an adder.

"Ah, I understand," said he, with sudden quietness. "Aythan has been more fortunate than I am."

"I do not care for any of the hateful things you may say," continued she. "It is worth them all to be able to tell you what I think of you, and I have done it."

Her words cut deep into him. So seldom in his life had he been upset or carried away by feeling that he was, perhaps, more vulnerable than any one who knew him would have believed. His nostrils were quivering and his lips were cold. He realised at last the incredible truth that she loved Aythan. But what he hardly understood was the maddening effect of his detaining touch on a woman of her spirit.

"You were not always of that mind," said he, his voice shaking. "I have known you a little more than civil."

Digitized by Google

"I have never liked you," said she, with a sort of two-edged simplicity. "I tolerated you for my father's sake. But I never will again."

He turned and went out from between the dusky walls of the yew.

In an agony of mortification and bitterness he put his horse's head towards home. The joints of his harness were well riveted but the arrows had smitten hard. He longed to punish Barbara for every word she had said, and the thought of her beauty maddened him the more because he could not cease from loving it while he hated her. He knew that their rupture was final and that forgiveness, could he bring himself to offer it, would avail him nothing. A woman may abuse a man, hate a man, even ridicule a man, and have to eat her words; she may trample on him and yet live to be his slave; but if she has told him that he has been tolerated for the convenience of another then there is nothing more to be said. Eustace the adroit, the careless, the confident, was almost physically shaken. He was highly strung, and it was the first blinding reverse he had ever experienced. He could have wept, had not fury and pride sustained him. When the lights of Crishowell House shone at him as he neared home they seemed to throw a pale glow into his sick heart. Barbara should not enjoy her triumph if he could help it. She should know, and soon, too, that his momentary whirl of passion was but the short-lived madness of a man who was the affianced husband of another woman. He would not have her proud of what he had offered. He walked into the house with his head high.

Digitized by Google

That night when Hester, followed by her needy gentlewoman, was on the way up-stairs to bed, he called her back to the drawing-room.

"Hester," he said, "I am tired of this and there is not much left now of the six months. Let us give out the truth."

She turned white, saying nothing for a moment. He put his arm about her. Fate had used him so heavily that the touch of her lips upon his cheek was comforting.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIX

THE LIGHT IN THE WINDOW

THE New Year was past before the Green Jiner's sentence expired. He made his way back to Crishowell to find Wern a mere desolation of stone heaps on the hillside and his wife installed in the cottage of which Hester had spoken.

Sarah was now well lodged—better than she had ever been since she threw in her lot with Tom Ukyn—and she had a certain amount of rough employment at Crishowell House. By weeding, sweeping, and miscellaneous jobs she was earning enough to keep herself and to lay by, in a cracked jug which stood on her mantelpiece, a weekly copper or two against the day of his return. She knew that he would not stray far, for experience had taught him that, while he lived with her, he need not do more work than he pleased. He recognised her talents sufficiently to make straight for the anchorage near her ponderous person the moment his prison door was opened.

Hester had no understanding of any class but her own. She wished her dependents well and was prepared to deal well with them so long as they gave her no inconvenience, but the gulf between herself and them she neither wished nor was able

Digitized by Google

to bridge. Sarah was the first creature living on her land in whom she had displayed a personal interest. She would see her at work as she strolled in the garden and pause beside her, asking any trivial question which might lead to conversation; and when Sarah, with her lynx eye for chances, begged that she might give shelter to her destitute husband on his return, she did not ask in vain. There seemed to be, for Mrs. Bridges, a fascination in her talk. The two women, so widely differing, were good haters, though one held consistently to the limits set for her by good breeding and kept silence while her heart burned.

Ukyn had come out of gaol leaner, paler, but unchanged. Two months of prison life is not a sufficient time to rob a man of much individuality, and it is possible that nothing could have done that, completely, for him. He slid into his place as though he had never left it, taking such odd bits of light work as he could find about the neighbourhood only when his wife's store ran low, and eyeing the wood round Crishowell with a passive appreciation which might be trusted, with time, to develop active results. Opportunist though he might be, both by trade and nature, the Green Jiner kept one fixed intention in his mind. He was going to be even with Aythan Waring.

He knew very well what he meant to do. It was out of his power to injure him personally without risking his own safety, but it had occurred to him to avenge himself through Nelly. The little dog, though still lame, was running about, and Ukyn felt that, could he get hold of her one dark evening and hang her on a convenient tree for her

Digitized by Google

master to find in the morning, he would have done something towards setting the balance between himself and the agent straight.

But the notion was not so easy to carry out as he hoped, for Nelly stuck more closely than ever to Aythan's heel. Long distances tried her stiff paw, and she knew that a piteous attitude or well-timed whine would ensure a journey finished in his arms, whether he walked or rode. Ukyn snarled to himself, as, from some hidden spot, he saw the inseparable pair and realised that his vengeance might tarry; the little terrier would have to lag far behind before he could venture to lay hands on her. He had learnt that Aythan was not a safe man to meddle with, and, while he was within earshot, he meant to run no risks. He had also discovered that, if business took him out after dark, Nelly was generally left at home; and he decided that his opportunity must be found on such an occasion. Lurking in some friendly shadow he might watch him leaving the house, and, when he had given him time to be a good mile away, he would come out, and, entering by an unlocked door or unfastened window, lay hold of the dog. Nobody, in these out-of-the-way places, took the precaution of securing anything. It was much in his favour that the rooms Aythan inhabited were completely cut off from the rest of the farm. There was a convenient thicket, too, at the west side of the place from which he might have a clear view of his enemy without being seen. The Green Jiner had much tenacity in his nature and he did not despair.

It was before perceptible length was added to the January days that he contrived to find a time to

Digitized by Google

suit his project. As he went towards Rood church in the darkness of a raw evening there was hope in his mind, for he had found out that Aythan would be kept late at a road meeting in Llangarth at which he had to represent Sir Helbert. He had not confided in Sarah; for Ukyn's schemes, when he had any, were as much a part of himself as was his gait, or the gaze with which he eternally fixed some problematical spot beyond the horizon. He could no more have transferred them to another than he could have made a present of his own characteristics to a neighbour.

The country lay in black silence round him as he traversed the fields, and there was not enough light even to show up the outline of the mountain before him. Not a star was out, not a glimmer above, for the shred of waning moon had gone down an hour earlier among the banked clouds. It was as though he were the only man in the world. He had a stout piece of cord in his pocket and a knife; he did not know which he would use first when the victim should be in his hands. Perhaps he would cut Nelly's throat before he strung her up, perhaps he would stab her as she hung. He was sorry to think that the repaying sight of Aythan's subsequent discovery was not compatible with safety, for, to enjoy it, he would willingly have stayed out all night, as he had done many and many a time for a smaller advantage. As the ground began to fall away under his feet he felt, though he could not see, that he was coming to the little dingle by which Rood church and its farm squatted at the mountain's side.

The house was like a house of the dead. There

Digitized by Google

came no gleam of firelight nor candle-shine from the windows; these, he knew, faced eastward, as though turning their backs deliberately on that part of the building in which the agent lodged. The hour was not late enough for the farmer's family to be asleep, and at first Ukyn fancied that he must be approaching the place from a wrong direction. He could not understand how he had managed to lose his bearings, and, like a wise man, he stood still, waiting to see whether some temporary object might not be hiding the unshuttered windows from his sight. In a short time there appeared a dim beam of light, eclipsed for an instant, but shining out again as he watched. He had not expected to see it appear so much to his left, and he made towards it, telling himself that he must have come farther west than he supposed. Soon it was just in front of him and his surprise grew, as, from its high level, the light appeared to emanate from the upper casement of a two-storied house. He paused again, not knowing what to make of his position. He was aware that the house had but one floor and he hesitated to go forward without greater certainty of his whereabouts, for his errand was not of such a kind as made him anxious to blunder into unforeseen notice. When at last he moved on, the ground seemed to have risen up against him and he tripped forward, catching a tangle of sodden grass in his hand. Then it dawned on him that he was at the foot of the mound on which Rood church itself stood, and that he had been right, after all, in his bearings. He was no nearer to the explanation of the dead darkness in which the farm lay, but he was certain that the fitful light by which he

Digitized by Google

steered was coming from a window of the church.

It was evident that people were astir somewhere, and, like Aythan when he started on his man-hunting that memorable night, now more than two months since, Ukyn was struck with astonishment. But, whereas Aythan's business would not wait, his own might be put aside while he slaked his curiosity, and he began cautiously to approach the church. The buried tombstones and the sudden inequalities of the ground hindered him a good deal, but he stumbled on, groping with his hands. As he drew near enough to see the outline of the walls, a faint sound came to him, as though of some wooden object in contact with stone. The muffled recurrent noise went on as he stood among the withered nettle-stalks and the rubbish that collects round uncared-for buildings; and the absence of voices in a place in which his ears told him that two or three persons must be at work suggested to his secretive soul that whatever might be going forward on the other side of the wall was being done surreptitiously. He laid his ear against the masonry near the narrow window from which the light had proceeded; its panes were dark, but an occasional flicker crossed them, showing up the diamond leading. The sill was just on a level with his chin, and, by raising himself on tiptoe, the Green Jiner found himself in a position to see into the church. The splay of the inner sill was cut deep, its angle being obtuse enough to allow the eye of a person looking in to command most of the interior.

Ukyn was in his true element. Stealth was scarcely a moral defect in him; it was a natural

Digitized by Google

condition of existence which he shared with the slant-eyed foxes, whose high-pitched barking seems to cry to the night of a half-understood discomfort; of the prescience of that choking, encroaching civilisation which is sweeping wild life from the earth. There is in the voice of the fox—that Red Indian of the animal world—a querulous presage of the fate of its kind, an uneasy knowledge that old things are passing away. He would not lay his face to the pane lest its whiteness should be visible within, but the glass was near the outer surface, and he could see enough of what was going on to put even the thought of his cherished revenge from him.

The glowing stream from a dark lantern was directed across the width of the church, and, on its straight bar of light, alive with the swimming of a myriad dusty motes, portions of men's legs could be seen moving in their labours, as though taking part in some solemn rhythmical measure. In one of the far corners of the place a stable lamp was set on a chest against the wall, showing the floor covered with a thick, soft substance, which the Green Jiner conceived, from the pungent smell escaping through a broken pane, to be wet barley. Having satisfied himself of this, he knew that the sounds he heard and the movements he could partially see were due to the work of some unknown but enterprising persons who were using the church pavement as a malting floor, and were in the act of turning the grain with wooden shovels.

Ukyn had strayed down so many by-ways of conduct that there was scarcely a form of rural misdemeanour unknown to him. As a boy he had been

Digitized by Google

in the employ of a man who malted illicitly and had helped in the very business he was now watching. His thoughts were too instinctive to allow his feelings to be detached from them, but, had he been able to divide them, he would have felt conscious admiration for the unnamed person who had such a fine understanding of opportunity. The detailed reasons of what he saw began to reveal themselves, and he realised how well the place was suited to the work on hand. He had been inside Rood church and remembered that the ancient unpolished oak pews, of which there were no more than a dozen on either side of the flagged aisle, stopped about twenty feet from the western wall, leaving bare a space as broad as it was long. The whole building was paved with flat-laid tombstones, on which both Welsh and English names were cut. The records of men and women of the two nations whose borders joined below the Black Mountain were graven on the flags hidden beneath the close grain, that, transformed, was to comfort the stomachs of their successors. Ukyn noticed that the small west window, narrow as the one at which he stood, was nearly covered by a piece of tarpaulin stretched across it, its trefoil-shaped top barely appearing above the improvised curtain; no doubt, in the farm itself, there was work afoot in conjunction with what he saw, and the same cause for darkness prevailed in both church and dwelling-house. There was no window nearer to the spot where the men were engaged than the one beside him and its counterpart opposite. He did not understand why these had been left unprotected, for he could not clearly see the boards laid across the one in the south wall

Digitized by Google

facing him, nor that those which had darkened the one through which he peered were fallen and lay on the church floor. Some one had been careless.

He wondered, as he pressed himself against the wall of the little ark-like place of worship, how long the merry business within had been going on. Its isolation was not the only advantage that Rood church offered to the men now inside it, for it was a place in which service was held but once in the month by a clergyman who had to ride across the mountain tracks from a parish farther over the Breconshire border. For nearly thirty days at a time, therefore, it was unvisited by any one but the tenant of Rood Farm, who had charge of the key; and Ukyn reflected with much interest that the fact gave him a good clue to the name of one of the shovelling figures which toiled amid the sprouting barley. The farmer might count with certainty on getting two floors of grain ready for the kiln in this interval of security, and, in mild weather, even three, allowing ten days for the average process of malting.

The Green Jiner had learned a great deal since he left his house that evening, and his curiosity was so strong that, when the shovelling ended and the workers began to put aside their tools and the "sprinkling-pan," whose spout protruded, like the nose of some uncouth beast, into the light, he lingered at his post, ready to crawl to the shelter of the nearest tombstone should any one come in his direction. But he felt pretty safe. The party would repair to the farm for a drink, if he knew anything of his fellow-men. At all hazards he must find out if Milman was in the church.

Digitized by Google

Before leaving the place one of the figures took up the stable lantern, and he watched it as it stepped gingerly over the barley and came up the aisle, holding the light high, while a monstrous procession of shadows went sprawling and bowing over the rough plaster of the wall. Then, knowing how essential fresh air is to malting, and fearing that the man was going round to open the windows, Ukyn shrank back from his point of vantage. But it was only for a moment; with commendable coolness he passed his fingers over the frame, and, finding that it had no latch and was not made to open, he remained quietly where he was.

It was a fantastic-looking scene that the moving lantern displayed to the Green Jiner. Rood church contained little ornament beyond a large representation of the royal arms painted on the plaster, and some of the more intimidating texts of Scripture which had been printed in black lettering on the sides of the chancel. Its one distinction lay in the battered rood-screen, from which those few antiquarians who had troubled their heads about its existence supposed the name to be derived. Rough local workmanship of the fourteenth century had thrown the wooden structure across the Norman chancel arch, and time had turned its red paint to a musty claret-colour, half obliterating the dotted pattern of white Tudor roses that it bore. Its gallery had almost fallen away, but there remained on the ancient panelling above the broken boards a mark showing where the great cross had been fixed upon the wood. The shadow of the screen was cast upwards like a gigantic skeleton as the object of Ukyn's interest passed underneath on his way

Digitized by Google

to the east window. He strode unconcernedly over the communion rails and set his light on the table.

But, just as his face should have been visible to the watcher outside, he knocked up against the lantern; it fell to the ground and went out. Ukyn could not recognise any tone in the murmur that followed, but a person who was indistinguishable to him came up the aisle to his companion's assistance, holding the bull's-eye low to guide his feet.

The man who was now standing on the communion table had got his fingers behind the board which darkened the narrow slit and opened the window before the other reached him. As he climbed down, his friend set his dark lantern where the extinguished one had stood.

The eye pointed towards that part of the wall which faced the Green Jiner, and its round of light fell straight upon one of the texts, encircling it as neatly as though an unseen hand had intervened to direct the luminous shaft.

The words, "The wicked shall be turned into hell," appeared, cut out from their background on a field of staring white.

An exclamation, loud and sudden, reached the Green Jiner.

"Lord ha' mercy on us, man! Look at that yonder!"

But though Ukyn saw the threatening message that glared from the black void, it had no power to move him: first, because he could not read; and secondly, because the voice, sharp with the accents of conscience and superstition, was the voice of Milman.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XX

HESTER AND HAPPINESS

Tom Ukyn went home down the hill without giving Aythan or Nelly another thought. What he had seen interested him enough to put everything else from his mind. Revenge might wait, but profit was too delicate a thing to be played with; for the rewards offered by the excise for smuggling information were good in those days when so many outwardly respectable people in the lonelier parts of Great Britain had private schemes for eluding government, and were, so to speak, up to their necks in illicit beer and malt. Illicit malting was an offence set about with many penalties. By the Act of 1827 licensed maltsters were required to make a written entry at the nearest excise office of all places and utensils used by them in their business, or submit to a forfeiture of one hundred pounds and the seizure both of the malt and the instruments used in its making. In addition to a fine of two hundred pounds for fraudulent concealment of malting, the forfeiture of thirty more was imposed on all who manufactured, in private or sequestered places, commodities on which there was a duty of excise. The excise officers had power to arrest and detain such persons; and any who were

Digitized by Google

bold enough to obstruct or resist them in the execution of their duty were liable for a further sum of one hundred pounds. Though he had no abstract regard for the law, the Green Jiner was glad to think that its heavy hand might be felt by others besides himself. As he stood before his wife's cottage, shaking the door and clamouring to be let in, he felt like a man, who, having discovered gold, is in haste to peg out his claim before his discovery gets abroad. He realised to the full the advantage that had been put unexpectedly into his hands.

Sarah had the—in these parts—unusual habit of turning her key after dark, and, when she had admitted him and the light from the tallow dip she carried fell on his eyes, she saw that they were bright with suppressed excitement.

"You be all of a shake, Tom," she began, as she stood by the chimney-piece wondering how she might privily convey the cracked jug in which her store lay from his sight. She was careful to keep it hidden when he was at home and to count its contents when he was out.

Ukyn sat down to the fireside and stared into it as though he were alone; she folded her arms and waited for him to speak.

"*You've* been after no good," she observed at last, finding that he remained silent. "I can tell by the look o' ye."

"Then you be wrong, you fool!" said he, turning to the fire to hide his smile.

"Well, well, so much the better," she rejoined placidly.

Suddenly he looked up at her. His secretiveness was melting in the glow of satisfaction, and his

Digitized by Google

sense of the luck that had befallen him was such that, while instinct forbade him to impart it, the turmoil in his mind made him mentally giddy enough to long for support. His fundamental confidence in her was so great that, when a crisis was upon him, it caused him to forget the contempt due to a wife.

When the tongue of a self-contained person is let loose there is no staying it. Little by little she urged the torrent of his excitement. The tallow dip guttered down and the hearth was cold before the two retired to rest with the load of their inspiring knowledge. Sarah put it aside as she would have put aside the cracked jug, or any other useful article, and slept; but her husband lay awake, restless, till morning.

* * * * * *

Long before Aythan came back from his road meeting, the church was dark and Milman and his companions had gone their respective ways. His absence was the reason that they had carried on their illegal business so early, for, while he was about, the farmer knew that he worked at risks too great to be run.

It was with a sorely exercised mind that he had given in to his wife's persuasions and had taken the young agent to lodge at the farm. Only the providential way in which Aythan's rooms were built out at the western side of the house had made such an arrangement possible, and the recess near the fire-place of one of the bedrooms which contained the kiln, had been curtained and barricaded by a movable cupboard, before he had been suffered to enter the place. Once, however, that he

Digitized by Google

was installed, Milman found everything running into its original groove. It was only the most remote of chances which could bring his lodger into the room with the concealed kiln. The church key was in his own absolute possession. None but himself had access to it save on one Sunday in the month, and he was cautious enough not to attempt to malt more than two floors of grain between time and time. The parson, when he arrived, found the place swept and garnished; Milman was a scrupulous man, he said, and he had not failed to annoy the sexton of his proper parish by holding up the farmer to him as a model of conscientious order. Mrs. Milman went so far as to say that Aythan's presence was a godsend. Who, she argued, would suspect illegal practices in the neighbourhood of a roof shared by Sir Helbert Bucknall's agent?

During the time of malting Milman kept the key on his own body. The windows of Rood church were opened at night to let the air circulate over the grain, but, in the daytime, boards and tarpaulins made temporary shutters against the eye of any casual passer who might chance to look in.

Barbara had tried many times to get a glimpse into the solitary building. She had heard from Aythan of the ancient rood-screen with its rough Tudor roses, and of the lion and unicorn which ramped eternally on the wall. The spot had always possessed a fascination for her, but a certain delicacy kept her from loitering in its neighbourhood since the young man had taken up his quarters at the farm. Once she had ridden up to the very window at which Ukyn had made his stirring discovery, but, as it was malting-time, she had gone

Digitized by Google

away, baffled by Milman's precautions. She promised herself that, some day, she would ask him to get the key and show her the strange things it guarded.

She had heard, in common with all the world, of Eustace's engagement. Its publicity was not a week old before he wrote the news to Tillestone. The letter was written in the most sanguine strain, and though addressed to Mr. Troup, she knew that, primarily, it was intended for herself. His affection for Mrs. Bridges, he explained—somewhat unnecessarily, Mr. Troup thought—was not of yesterday; it had been the thing nearest his heart since her widowhood. He had gone through a great deal and he did not deny that he had often lost courage, and that he now shuddered at the remembrances of certain follies into which women's vanity and the attraction of a pretty face had well-nigh led him. Of one escape he could speak only with bated breath. Barbara's breath was bated, too, by the audacity of such a remark made to her own father.

There was something that almost compelled admiration in Eustace's perfect reading of her character and circumstances. He knew her for one who would betray nobody, not even her enemy, and he had gauged to a nicety the relationship between father and daughter. She would refrain from confidences not only because she had no mind to make them, but because Mr. Troup would be as likely as not to look upon a confidence as a breach of the peace, an unwelcome ripple in that domestic smoothness which was the most important thing in the world.

Hester was now within sight of the promised

Digitized by Google

land: the little flock of neighbours which stands, in country places, for public opinion had taken the news of the engagement with apparent calm. She had been congratulated by several people in terms under which she could detect no lurking sting, and as, for some time past, she had been careful to show herself as little as possible in public with her lover and frequently with her companion, her place as a woman of discretion seemed unchallenged. One or two tatlers whispered that Mrs. Bridges had more reason than most brides, whether maids or widows, to know what she was about; it was not every one who had the advantage of a trial trip in domesticity before the final launching; but, these comments excepted, the world was chiefly employed in trying to find out her age, and, with every intention of rigorous justice, putting it at five years short of the mark. It was her own relations who did not spare her. With the peculiar reasoning of those days they attacked her as though her re-marriage were a discredit to her sex, and her choice of a man a few years her junior a criminal act. They scarcely suggested that Eustace was a fortune-hunter, being too much concerned with what they described as her loss of dignity.

But Hester cared little. The world had become a wider place to her since she left her relations, and she had discovered, long since, that there are times in life when every one has to accept the entire responsibility of his own actions. She felt perfectly capable of doing so. The road to power begins beyond the gate of self-repression; and she stood at it now, a resolute woman, ready to fight desperately for her own share of life's emotions. It seemed

Digitized by Google

strange to her that her relations did not understand how infinitely little it mattered to her whether they were alive or not.

But calm as was the front she showed them, the flying figure of perfect happiness seemed little nearer as she advanced towards it. Perhaps the sight of its fluttering garments on the horizon stirred her pursuing soul too much and made her relax the tight grip in which she had held it since Eustace's troublous presence came to her. There is no force so terrible as the baulked womanhood his careless words and half-implied love-making had let loose in the passionless, complacent, decorous being who had been Matthew's wife. It is a flood which will be strewn with wreckage long before it reaches the sea.

Her hatred of Aythan had increased upon her, now that her marriage was so near. The wedding was to take place in April, and the legal business which she had to go through in connection with it brought before her in a hundred instances the ever-recurring truth that Eustace and Eustace's possible sons would, should she die before them, have to give room to the supplanter. Hester was jealous for her betrothed husband and her unborn children with the frantic, vicarious jealousy of women for those they love. She had brooded over the knowledge that all belonging to her must, one day, be swept from the place in which she had reigned, until its whispering voice broke upon her with each moment of solitude. She would wake in the night and lie still on her face, her strong white teeth meeting on the cover of her pillow as she thought of it.. Her personal love for Crishowell was not great, but, since

Digitized by Google

it had become her own, her sense of possession had grown immeasurably. If only some messenger from heaven could come down to tell that she would outlive Aythan—which might well be in this world of chance and change—she would have laid her hand, at last, on the skirts of that elusive happiness she pursued! But still, the torturing voice reminded her that he might marry and have heirs of his own—was he not in love already, with that wandering, red-lipped girl at Tillestone, whose youth, in the miserable days of uncertainty she had gone through with Eustace, had been her envy and her fear? Not that it had availed Barbara anything, she told herself proudly, as she twined her fingers round the ruby ring she wore, even at night.

Mrs. Ukyn's devious path in life had never yet brought her to a listener so untiring as Hester Bridges. She would lie in wait for her mistress whenever the fur-clad figure was to be seen out of doors, and as, in winter, Hester preferred the garden to the lanes, few days passed without some exchange of words. But, no matter how distant the lady's manner might be, how curt her business with the working woman, the same topic would be the eventual goal of their intercourse. The private grievances of the uneducated are ever near their lips and it would have taken less encouragement than Hester tacitly gave to let her companion's tongue loose against her enemies. The strange attraction that Aythan's name had for her was plain to Sarah Ukyn, as were many things lost upon other people. She knew well how to raise that spot of colour upon Hester's cheek, that dim flame that slept behind her eyes. Hester saw neither the

Digitized by Google

humour of the woman's mind nor the half-grotesque fundamental shrewdness which delighted Eustace; all that interested her was the force of hate which seemed the reflection of what was buried in her own soul. And Sarah knew that too, and ministered to her need.

Once Hester went to see her in her cottage; she spoke to no one of her intention though she did not try to conceal her visit. Small artifices were foreign to her, for she was too proud a woman to hide anything except by silence. But she started on meeting Eustace as she came out of the little house which stood with its blue smoke mounting against the larches.

"I hope she was amusing," said he, as they met.

He had seen the start and he knew that his betrothed in search of humour was as natural a sight as an archbishop practising leapfrog.

"Oh, very," she replied.

"I never remember your going into any of the cottages before," continued he, rather cruelly, as he turned homewards with her.

"I went on business. She spoke to me of her chimney, which should be attended to."

"You are as conscientious as Aythan," said he.

"Don't speak to me of Aythan! I hate it!"

"My dear creature," he said, smiling; "what are you saying? Fie, Hester! Do you think I am blind? Sarah Ukyn's chimney might fall to pieces on the top of her without taking you a step out of your way if she did not speak to you of Aythan You protect her because she detests him. You may not think so, my dear, but ——"

"Do you suppose I am going to deny it?" in-

Digitized by Google

terrupted she, stopping and looking full in his eyes.

As she met his bantering look she turned quickly from him.

"I wish he were dead!" she exclaimed, catching her breath.

"Well, so he will be, some day," said Eustace.

"Yes; but I may be first. Don't laugh, Eustace —don't laugh at me! Ah, God! what it is to hate any one like that!"

She clung to him. Her face was distorted.

"I hate him—I hate him—I hate him!" The words came through her clenched teeth as though forced from her by agony.

He put his arm round her for fear she should fall. But her body was rigid in his grasp. He was almost frightened.

"If you laugh at me I will kill you," she said in the same tortured voice. "If you laugh ——"

But her words died in a violent sob. Her teeth were set.

"For God's sake, Hester, don't have hysterics here!" he cried.

She shook as though blown by some tempest of wind. A kind of dumb paroxysm swept over her. He drew her on towards the house. Within sight of its walls he relaxed his hold and they walked on silently.

He opened the door for her and she went in, shutting it behind her and leaving him outside. He felt not unlike a man in a dream who has looked on some familiar thing and seen it turn under his gaze into something different—something horrible.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXI

THE PORCH

It was Milman's custom, between the taking up of one floor and the laying down of the next, to set every door and window in Rood church wide open. The air carried away any tell-tale odour that remained and gave a fine impression of openness, the effect of which his guilty conscience valued, though no other person was sufficiently interested in the place to notice it. He might almost have done his malting without the trouble of turning the key, but he had all a sensible man's respect for that inconvenient factor in life, the off chance.

This evening the crescent which had denied her help to the Green Jiner was pouring the white flood of a full moon on the world, striking the church into such distinctness that the little pin-points of mica in its slate roof sparkled as though in frost. A black angle lay upon the grass at the foot of each tombstone, and the undulations of the ground were merged into a common flatness where their levels were not high enough to intercept the streaming light. The silly face on the effulgent disc tossed in a grey sea of sky like the face of an irresponsible swimmer smiling at the current which is carrying him away. The long outline of the mountain

Digitized by Google

underneath it had lost its sharpness and the hollows were filled with vapour. It was as though the earth swam in intoxication with the moon.

The brilliance enveloped Aythan as he hurried along below the Black Mountain on his way home. It was past seven o'clock and he had been on foot since midday, for his cob was lame and he had been to Talgarth. Though he hurried he had not taken the shortest road, for the mountain drew him to its feet in the strong meshes woven of association, and the whole expanse of its plateau was bewitched ground for him.

He was not in good spirits. He had not seen Barbara for a long time, not since before she went to London, and, at his last meeting with Sir Helbert (who was letting a certain coarse friendliness return to his demeanour) the old man had unconsciously driven him half mad by his description of Eustace at Tillestone. He had no real fear that Eustace might influence Barbara against him; so he assured himself again and again; yet Sir Helbert's comments made him no happier, and a miserable feeling, which he admitted to be unworthy and yet suffered to torment him, kept him away from the place. Why had she never so much as let him hear of her return?

"I suppose girls like an impudent tongue," Sir Helbert had said; "and no doubt the young gentleman found it served him better with Miss Troup than it did with me. He was put out when I disturbed them, I assure you. She's a damned attractive-looking hussy—too good for such a jackanapes."

Aythan turned down the road towards the farm.

Digitized by Google

The whiteness of the dew-lit, moon-struck grass, in which the church stood like an island, was spread before him with an almost theatrical effect as he paused to look at it. The place was very still and a trickle of water which ran under the way by the entrance to the farmyard broke the glaring quiet; mixed with it was the sound of a horse's hoofs. The horse was stepping carefully, picking its way.

There was no hoof-beat nowadays but trod on Aythan's heart, waking wild possibilities; and he stood looking eagerly at the small patch of lane that skirted the farm buildings. A woman rode into the light from between its banks; she was coming towards him, and as she crossed the water he heard the hollow sound of the pony's tread on the culvert. There was only one woman who went abroad on horseback in these parts. In another moment they met.

"You are surprised to see me," began Barbara; "and you are thinking how late it is for me to be out. Well, so it is. But my father has kept me writing his letters since this morning—he has not been well for nearly a month. It was getting dark before I was free but I told him I really must go out. At this time of year he lights his candles at three o'clock every day, you see, so he did not know the time, and I was gone before he found it out."

"But will he not be anxious?" asked Aythan, struck, for the first time in his life, with sympathy for Mr. Troup.

"Oh, no; he will remember nothing about me till to-morrow."

Digitized by Google

Aythan's sympathy vanished.

"You have not been to Tillestone for ages," said Barbara; "you have never even inquired for him. It is very unfeeling."

"I never heard he was ill."

"But you would have, if you had come."

This being unanswerable, he looked down and punched the earth with his stick.

Her eyes sparkled.

"You know," she continued, "I have not seen you since I met Sir Helbert Bucknall."

"He told me about it," replied Aythan, looking up at her with an expression which made her bite back the smile hovering on her lip, lest he should see it.

She knew her power over him well, by this time. It touched her, too, and something almost protective stirred in her. He was the strongest, the most reliable, the most manly man she had ever known; the only man in the world for her; she had admitted it in her secret soul already, but she knew that, in her hands, he was as sensitive as a girl. Yet she would have needed the character of one of the more respectable goddesses, instead of her own, to have refrained from dallying with the forces she swayed. It was not that she underrated them; far from it; but the security in which she knew herself to hold the great prize of his love made her turn her possession over, as a woman will turn over and play with a jewel before she clasps it on her neck.

"Well, I am glad to see you at last," she said, smiling at him; "and I am sure you will not be so neglectful again. All the same, I believe something

Digitized by Google

has been making you stay away. Now tell me, what is it?"

She bent down and looked at him as a grown-up person may look down at a child who is keeping back the truth.

"Tell me at once," she went on, with mock seriousness.

"You have been away such a long time," he said at last.

"And you did not know when I came back. Was that it?"

"Yes, I did, but——"

"But what?"

"I did n't know whether you would care to see me or not."

"Oh, but you know I like visitors. I was even glad to see Sir Helbert Bucknall, and I was *delighted* to see your cousin," said Barbara cruelly.

She saw that she had struck hard. His face stiffened as the muscles of a man sparring stiffen to receive a blow. Then her heart smote her as she met his eyes.

"I should like to tell you something I have told nobody," said she impulsively. "When your cousin was at Tillestone that day, he spoke of you unkindly, unpardonably, I thought. Mr. Waring, I know enough about you to be sure I am making no mischief. There is a breach between you already; I guessed it long, long ago."

"I was afraid of that," broke in Aythan. "I was afraid he would try to spoil our friendship."

"He will never try again," said Barbara, "because he will never have the opportunity. I don't

Digitized by Google

think he will even come to Tillestone when he is married, if I am there; and if he does, I shall certainly not see him. He will not want to come," she added smiling, "for I practically turned him out of the house. I have often wished to, and I did it at last."

He stood dumb for a moment, taking in the full significance of her words.

"Why did you doubt me?" she continued. "Am I such a fine-weather friend as to listen to what mean and spiteful people may say?"

"You are the best, the most beautiful, the most adorable woman in the world!" exclaimed Aythan.

What more he might have said was checked on his lips, for the black pony wheeled round so suddenly that he was almost knocked down, and then stood up on his hind legs as neatly as though it had been trained in a circus.

They were standing by a yew-tree growing in the middle of the lane at the southern curve of the church mound. Its knotted roots protruded from a grassy eminence overlooking the churchyard, on which, under the canopy of the dark boughs, were the remains of an ancient whipping-post and stocks. The swift shadow of an owl which flew hooting from the branches was more than the pony's nerves could endure as the hollow aërial voice rang out over the group by the tree.

Aythan sprang to the little animal's head.

"That was really enough to upset any one," said Barbara, as he stood soothing the pony.

The owl skimmed away, half dazzled by the brilliance of the moon, and lit on the squat, wooden

Digitized by Google

belfry that crowned Rood church. Barbara followed the bird with her eyes.

"To think that I have never been able to get into that place!" she said; "it is always locked when I pass, and the windows boarded up."

"They are not now," said Aythan; "and the church was open when I went out. I have known it to be locked for weeks at a time. I suppose Milman has been cleaning it."

"I can see that from here," cried she, standing up in her stirrup. "Why, the door is open! Oh, Mr. Waring, let us go and look at it! I may never have such a chance again."

"Won't it be too dark to see?" said he, delighted nevertheless by the prospect.

"But the moonlight is like day. It will look wonderful—stranger than at any other time."

She slid from her saddle as she spoke.

They went across the grass together, leaving the pony tied to an iron ring in the stocks. The church door stood wide with the white light pouring in through it and through the windows. Most of them were open and the boards which had obstructed them lay in a heap near the altar rails. The bare part of the floor was empty and spotless. Across the chancel the rood-screen reared itself like a black barrier on its slender supports, the dull red of the panelling resolved into uniform darkness. The moonshine that filled the space beyond it and struck from the narrow chancel windows upon the altar was divided into three arched masses of light by the lower framework of the screen, appearing like three shining caves cut through the blackness. Above, in the opaque mystery of the loft, the rood-

Digitized by Google

shaped mark that showed where the austere symbol had been, hung like a phantom cross below the beams of the roof. On the whitewash of the north wall the grotesque figures of the lion and unicorn began to detach themselves as the eyes of Aythan and Barbara grew accustomed to the medley of shadows surrounding them.

The two stood silent in the lonely uncouthness of the neglected church. There was no sign of man or of man's requirements, whether physical or spiritual, and the cold atmosphere of disuse filled it from floor to ceiling. No book lay on the bare pulpit-ledge, no covering on the rickety table within the communion rails; one of the table legs was broken off a few inches from the ground and the moon showed a brick which had been pushed under it to do duty for the missing part. The memorial tablets on the walls were of dark stone, like hatchments set out in warning rows to preach to an absent congregation of mortality.

There was little that could frighten Barbara in the every-day world, but here the dark wings of the intangible beat about her among the unfamiliar forms and shadows of the place and she scarcely dared to leave Aythan's side. But presently she went into the chancel. His heart was boiling within him as he stood, bareheaded, watching her through one of the arches of the screen. He longed to follow her and pour out his love, there and then, to hold her in his arms on the very steps of the altar.

"This is the most curious place I have ever seen," she whispered as they passed up the aisle and stopped before the painted heraldic device; "I must

Digitized by Google

see it by daylight too. I hardly think I could have ventured in alone at this hour, things have such an unearthly look. I am so glad you are here."

She gathered the folds of her habit together and turned to leave the church, for, at her last words, a quality which arrested her came into his silence, and she saw that he had never looked at the ramping creatures on the wall, but at her alone. The white stream from the door opposite to which they were standing revealed every line and angle in his face and his eyes seemed to be consuming her.

A sudden panic took Barbara, and, for the first time, the strangeness of her position struck her. Conventions did not trouble her often, but they sprang on her now in this remote place of ghostly forms bound in by the night and the solemn barriers of hill. She was awed, unhinged. She feared to look at the man who stood, quivering with passion, beside her. What must he think of her, too? She did not know many girls, but, of the few of her acquaintance, not one, she was sure, would have allowed herself to get into such a situation as this. She was accustomed to fear nothing and heed little, and to do as she pleased with that free solitude which was her lot irrespective of any choice of her own. But what folly had she done now?

"I must go," she said, turning from him hastily.

It was but three strides to the porch and he stopped her as she reached it.

"You shall not!" he cried; "you must listen to me first. For God's sake, Barbara, listen!"

"No, no; not now. Oh! not now!"

But he held her fast and all the passion of the long months he had loved her burned in his kisses.

Digitized by Google

The folds of her habit, freed from the hands set against his breast to push him away, encumbered her feet on the uneven stones of the porch. She tore herself from him, but the end of the skirt was twisted like a snake round her feet and she would have fallen if he had not caught her again.

"Let me go! Aythan, Aythan, let me go!"

She had said the same words to Eustace only a few weeks since; but the contempt, the mastery of her tones as she struggled with him then had gone now. This was a very different matter.

The fear in her voice wounded Aythan to the quick as he released her. He had never seen her anything but confident, sure of herself, sure of her charm, of her relations with the world. He did not understand how the grim, haunting atmosphere of the church had shaken her nerves; he did not know the agony of self-reproach that had seized her nor the passionate strength of his own arms.

"How could you?" she cried. "How could you do such a thing? I never thought when I came here with you that I did wrong, but I did—I did! I shall never forgive myself! And Heaven knows what you will think of me now!"

Every word fell like a lash upon him.

"Do you think I am a brute?" he said.

She leaned against the doorway, trembling.

"I am the most wretched man alive," said Aythan, sitting down disconsolately upon the bench that ran along the inside of the porch wall; his elbows were on his knees and he leaned his head on his hands. He felt like a traitor.

He could hear her quick breathing in the silence that fell between them.

Digitized by Google

"Don't," said the girl at last; "don't say that. I am going now."

"Barbara," he began, lifting his head as she moved away, "tell me you do not hate me."

"Hate you? Never, never, Mr. Waring. It is not that, indeed it is not that."

He followed her over the grass to the yew-tree where the pony stood tethered to the stocks. He loosed the rein from the iron ring and threw it back over the little beast's head. Then he turned to lift her into the saddle. But his arms dropped.

"I cannot let you go, Barbara," he said; "not without a word—not like this. Darling, I have behaved like an untrustworthy brute and I suppose it would be no more than I deserve if you never spoke to me again. But I love you, Barbara, more than it's possible to tell you, because I am not clever enough to say all I mean. Oh, the months and months I have loved you, Barbara!"

He had taken her hand while he spoke and he could feel her trembling all over.

"I have frightened you," he said; "clumsy fellow that I am! and small wonder too. Take time, Barbara. I will not ask you to-night. But I will come to Tillestone and you must give me your answer. May I come?"

"You may, indeed."

"But how soon?"

"Ah, I had forgotten!" said she. "We shall be away from Tillestone for a fortnight. The doctor has ordered change for my father."

His face fell.

"But I may come after that?"

"After that," she said softly.

Digitized by Google

"And you have forgiven me?" he asked, looking up at her when he had put her on the pony.

The saddle is a safe place. She held out her bare hand to him; permission was in her eyes. It was her left hand and he sought the spot on which he hoped, one day, to see the glimmer of gold, and pressed his lips to it. There was not much fault to be found with him as a lover.

When she had gone he went back into the church; he seemed to have lived a lifetime since they entered it together. He sat down in one of the empty pews and leaned his head on his arms. His pulses beat —he had been a fool, a brute—no wonder she had been upset by his violence. He had behaved badly and he ought to be ashamed of himself. But he was not.

Then and there he vowed that he would give her full time before he demanded his answer, making no sign. He could afford to wait while he had for company the remembrance of her soft look as she held out her hand. He rose and went out, leaving his hat in the pew and his blackthorn stick on the floor of the church, forgotten.

The hope that Barbara had raised made him half drunk with passion and excitement. The fires in his heart were glowing and throbbing, and now that the strain of his own suspense was slackening, the vibration of the furnace shook him through and through. He had had a hard time and the long waning of the year had brought hard tasks with it. He had hoped, despaired, burned and held himself in check; and much that he had been forced to do in Sir Helbert Bucknall's service had been bitter in the doing; none knew how bitter to him. He had

Digitized by Google

lived alone, but for his dog Nelly; the habit of silence was strong on him; and the wound dealt him when he left Crishowell House was barely healed. But now, what mattered anything? She loved him. That was all he needed.

She had not spoken the actual words, but her eyes, looking down on him over the black pony's neck, had spoken for her and the hand she had allowed him to hold to his lips. She had told him to come to Tillestone, and, as soon as she returned, in a short week or two, he would go there and claim her. The thought of Mr. Troup and the attitude he might assume did not trouble him for a moment; for he could not imagine the ineffectual gentleman wielding any influence which was not bounded by the walls of his candle-lit sitting-room. Whether Barbara was rich or poor he did not know and did not care. He had enough to keep her and could work for more.

Passion of love, passion of wrath, passion of fear, none of these monarchs sway a divided empire. Rest was not for Aythan to-night, nor food, nor sleep. He passed the farm without entering. The calm slopes of the Black Mountain, the immovable mass that had watched him for twenty years of his life seemed to call his feverish spirit into its shadow. There was none to whom he could unburden himself but the great, silent presence which saw all, heard all; whose feet stood rooted in the strength of the universe, whose head overlooked the valley, seeing the changes of night and day and the gathering in of waters from far-off watersheds and unseen springs.

The small hours had set in, when, having had

Digitized by Google

his fill of wandering, he crossed his own threshold. Though he was tired out and though his excitement had calmed, he did not go to bed. His fire was almost in ashes as he sat down in the big chair by the hearth, but he made it up, and, lost in the misty windings of the future, fell asleep beside it.

The night wore by and he lay still; and, when the risen sun illuminated the window, he rose, bewildered for a minute, and then, with the dawning of one radiant recollection, stood up, exulting to meet the new day.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXII

ON GOVERNMENT SERVICE

When the moon had declined from her post over the end of the Black Mountain and gone down leaving a darker world, a stealthy activity awoke in Rood Farm.

To-night the new floor of barley was to be laid. The last one had evolved itself successfully into malt and there was now enough time for another to work out its destiny with several day's margin to spare before the recurrence of the monthly service. Milman and two of his men had started on their labours with the setting of the moon, boarding the windows and stacking their shovels and sprinkling-cans in a corner as soon as she hung low enough in the sky to withhold her light from their doings. With her shifting, the bright patches in the church had grown smaller and the objects Aythan and Barbara had seen clearly were reabsorbed into the black uniformity of their background.

While these things were going on, that strange guardian of the public interest, the Green Jiner, was again lurking near the church under cover of the darkness. The excise officers had paid as much attention to his discovery as he could wish, and had

Digitized by Google

also shown unwonted discernment in keeping the matter secret. He had been employed for some days in watching the place, not as a common skulker, but as a paid, if temporary, servant of the law.

The malt had been taken away with all its traces by the time Ukyn's voice reached the official ear, but his orders were to haunt the neighbourhood of Rood church, and, at the first sign of activity, to warn the officer who, with a half-dozen men at his back, had waited for his summons every night now for over a week in a barn on the way to Crishowell. He had reached his post and crawled into the shadow of a bush commanding the porch just as Barbara and her lover parted at the yew-tree. Peering from his hiding-place, he was too far from the spot to recognise the rider, but he heard the tread of the pony's hoofs, and, lying close to his mother earth, he saw Aythan as he came over the clear stretch of grass and went into the church.

The immense satisfaction that Ukyn felt on the night of the discovery at the spectacle of Milman's face in the church was as nothing compared to the thrill which went through him at the sight of the agent. Here was a development, indeed! He drew back into his bush to adjust his ideas; he had been inclined to quarrel with the zeal that brought him to his work while darkness was yet far off and to think regretfully of the fire burning on Sarah's hearth, but he changed his mind. He watched with straining eyes the bareheaded young man who came walking between the scattered tombstones as though the earth belonged to him. Unlessoned though he was in the complexities of human

Digitized by Google

nature, he knew that no common influence made a man look and move as this one looked and moved. Aythan was near enough, as he reached the porch, for Ukyn to distinguish his features, and he stood there, his hand on the wall, to listen for the tread that had now died against the mountain. Ukyn's head came forward again. Who was the rider? What must be the importance and profit of an enterprise that could excite and spur a man like that? How many were engaged in it? It was evident that some one found it worth his while to come from far. If he lay where he was till sunrise he would see the business out. He had heard people talk who wondered that Aythan Waring was content to waste his energies in Sir Helbert Bucknall's service and to live apart from his own class in an isolated farmhouse; but he knew the answer to these questions now. There was no doubt that he had as much interest in the malting as the man under whose roof he lived. It was true that there was one law for the rich and another for the poor. While the agent hunted him into prison he had been no better employed than himself. But all that would be changed soon. He thought of the excise officers, snug in their barn a mile away, and smiled till the long curve of his mouth touched his whisker.

He saw Aythan come out of the building and go down the mound to the farm, and still he kept watch under the leafless tangle of his bush. The moon sank lower and was on the verge of disappearance when his ears told him that there were people about and he sat up, stiff with damp and cold; the night was clear enough to show him three

Digitized by Google

men, who, each laden with a bulging sack, were coming in Indian file to the church.

Ukyn understood enough about malting to know that Milman and his companions had a hard night's work before them. The barley was sufficiently heavy to prevent its being brought in anything but moderate quantities at a time up the steep incline of the mound, and there were twenty square feet of flooring to be covered to a depth of over twelve inches. He gathered himself up, moistening his lips with his tongue as though to taste the sweetness of anticipation. But before starting to warn the constable he was determined to find out for certain whether Aythan was one of the party in the church; for the dim forms under the moon-forsaken skies had revealed no identity.

A sound of planks being moved came from the building, and he guessed that the obstructing boards were being replaced in the windows; he could not expect that the luck which had helped him before would again leave a point of vantage free for his eyes, and he felt for the knife which was his constant companion and which served him in more capacities than could be counted. Though its primary use lay in cutting material for besoms and whiskets, it skinned dead animals, dug holes for snares, sliced his scanty bread and cheese, and did every work for him that his fingers could not compass. He carried it on any part of his body that chanced to be convenient, and, out of a piece of leather, which, in a propitious hour, he had filched from the smithy behind "The White Cow," he had made a rude sheath that held the blade and prevented it from either breaking itself or disembowel-

Digitized by Google

ling its owner. He hoped, with this trusty thing, to widen some chink or scrape some hole through which, by sound or by sight, he might detect Aythan's presence.

As silently as possible Ukyn approached the church and began to feel his way along the wall under the east window, which was as dark and dead in the stone as a blind eye in its socket. It was above the level of his head, and he passed round to his old standpoint at the north side of the chancel and searched with groping hands for the broken pane. As he put a tentative finger through the opening the contact of the boards made him draw it hurriedly back lest his touch should move the barrier and betray him; and he crept cautiously on to the next window to find it as opaque as those he had passed. He dared not go round to the southern side of Rood church for fear that his prowling shadow should be seen passing the porch, for he had not heard the door being shut and he was certain that the workers within would soon return to the farm for fresh loads of barley. But he owed it to himself to leave nothing that could incriminate Aythan to conjecture, and, with the tireless active patience in which the civilised world is so far behind the uncivilised one, he laid himself down alongside the stonework and waited till the game he hunted should reappear.

As soon as he heard the footsteps of the three men go down to the farm he rose, and slipping round to the porch, peered in. A stable lantern stood on the church pavement, and, though its light was feeble, it was enough to show him that the grain already scattered occupied a very small

Digitized by Google

space. A great many loads would be needed before the flags could be covered. He snatched up the light and went down the aisle, bent almost double and holding it close to the floor; every window was blocked, and, having satisfied himself of this fact, he put the lantern back where he had found it and stood considering what he should do.

He looked into the darkness of the rood-screen looming across the chancel beyond the circle of the lantern's feeble shine. There was no way of reaching the rood-loft, and the uncovered gallery would afford no concealment, even were he able to climb to it without bringing the whole crazy structure about his ears. The only thing that could shelter him, should he hide himself in the church, was the pulpit built against the south wall, a solid, hexagonal object.

The Green Jiner leaped up the couple of stone steps and crouched upon the pulpit floor. There was plenty of room in its enclosure for his thin body, and he drew his hand over the oak panels in search of some crack through which he might see enough of the workers, when they came back, to identify them. Here he would remain till the next loads had been disposed of, and, while more were being fetched, he could slip out of the place and make all speed for the barn. Then he would return with the officer and see the end.

Damp had warped the boards of the pulpit and widened the divisions between them so much that he was able to thrust the whole blade of his knife into the cracks. It did not take him long to shave the edges of the rotting oak till he had made a spy-hole through which everything in the west end of

Digitized by Google

the building would be within range of his eye. He worked softly, stopping as there came to him the noise of sacks being dropped in the porch. Apparently Milman had a good reserve waiting in the farm, for Ukyn heard the sound of retreating feet and their return three or four times before the men entered again, dragging their loads. To-night they had no light but the stable lantern, and, as they kept it on the ground, the faces of the toilers were only made plain while they stooped; but Ukyn heard the voice of Milman as he addressed one of his own labourers by name, and grieved in his heart when their companion bent down, revealing a bearded countenance very different from the one he hoped to see. No, Aythan was not there.

The bitter disappointment that filled the Green Jiner was scarcely softened by the thought that his enemy might be implicated in the business without taking an active part in it. He was too fine to work, no doubt, though he was not too fine to put those iron hands of his on poor men's necks and drag them down as if he were a fighting dog.

So many sacks had been carried to the church before the spreading of their contents began that the floor was being rapidly submerged by the barley. Ukyn was growing impatient, for he had imagined that the men would abide by their first plan of discharging and scattering the grain as it was brought. He had found out all he wanted to know. What should he do if Milman, when he left the place, were to turn the key and come back no more? Suppose there were no more sacks to be brought but those which stood already in the porch? There was not a window large enough to admit of his

Digitized by Google

escape through it, and his whole night's work might be lost while he lay a prisoner. He might be locked in till they came back on the following day to turn the barley; he might be unable to escape unseen. He blamed himself for the foolhardy act of cutting off his own retreat.

While Ukyn's heart was thus misgiving him Milman raised himself slowly from his work.

"No more nor two sacks, now, be there?" he inquired, as he straightened his stiffening back.

"That 's all," was the reply.

The speaker went out into the porch.

"Now for the windows and then home," said the farmer cheerfully.

Ukyn held his breath and glanced upwards; his eyes, well inured to the dark, caught a glimpse of the hanging cord against the diamond panes of the casement just over the pulpit.

He had not remembered, when he took his place, that the windows on the southern side of Rood church were made to open, and as he heard Milman feeling his way up the aisle, his sensations were those of a cat when the tree in which she has taken refuge is surrounded by terriers

There was only one thing for him to do. Should the farmer go first to the east window as he had done before, he might slip out of his lair, and, creeping towards the door, make a dash for freedom. The hands of the two labourers would be hampered by their work, and, as they had no suspicion that an unseen human being was in the church, he might gain the churchyard before they realised what had happened.

The steps came towards him as he crouched; he

Digitized by Google

turned himself noiselessly so as to keep his eyes to the danger. Every nerve in his body was alert, every muscle ready for a spring, in case he should come to close quarters with the advancing man. Milman paused as he reached the rood-screen and then turned aside to the pulpit.

As he put his foot on its step the darkness in the oaken enclosure seemed to come to life in his face and he fell backwards, hurled by the rush of something, whether human or devilish he could not tell, that swept by him. His cry rang up to the cross-shaped mark on the loft and echoed among the rafters.

The Green Jiner fled down the aisle as Milman scrambled to his feet, and it is likely that he would have escaped successfully into the night but for one of those trivial chips that break from circumstances to wedge themselves between the cogs of destiny. Aythan had left his hat on the outer end of a pew, and, as the farmer passed, his coat had brushed it from its place. It lay in the aisle, and when Ukyn sped by, it tripped him and spun between his feet, throwing him forward. As he stumbled to free himself the labourers let their sacks fall in sudden amazement. They were hailed by Milman, who had as much presence of mind as most men.

"The door," he roared. "Shut the door!"

The quicker-witted of the two leaped forward in response and threw the weight of his body against the panels. The door shut with a bang as Ukyn reached it through the thick carpet of damp grain. He dashed aside just as the second man, realising that the night's business had been spied upon, caught up a heavy blackthorn stick that stood near

Digitized by Google

the lantern, leaning against the wall; he had not noticed it before, but he now armed himself with it and began to strike about at random.

With the clang of the shutting door the Green Jiner grew desperate. The farmer turned the key and joined his companions in the scuffle that now began in the building. Round the walls they went feeling and groping, Ukyn's unerring protective instincts keeping him out of the chancel from which the rood-screen would complicate his retreat. Over the pews he swung himself, crouching and vaulting; in its echoing spaces the roof flung to and fro the clatter of stumbling feet and the heavier sounds of limbs in contact with hard substances. Rood church was changed from a place of worship into a kind of human ratpit above which the lion and unicorn and the dim mark of the cross stood, unseen but intransient signs of power temporal and spiritual, over the tumult.

But, at last, chance and effort ran together, and hunters and hunted met in a contending mass. The farmer's grasp was on the intruder, who had blundered against him in the stress of pursuit and was writhing and fighting in the hands of his captor. Ukyn's sobbing breath kept time to his convulsive efforts for freedom. The bearded man, who was the oldest and stiffest of the party, withdrew himself from the fray and leaned, with a stitch in his side, against the door while his comrade went to lend help to Milman.

"Mind the knife! He's got a knife," cried he, holding up the light in one hand while he pressed the other to his ribs. Though the stitch in his side made him somewhat inarticulate there was

Digitized by Google

a momentary gleam of steel to interpret his words.

Ukyn had managed to draw his weapon from the sheath in which he had replaced it, but he was able to do no more. For the second time in his life a powerful grip was on his throat, choking him, and the remembrance of another struggle that he would never forget shot dismay through every fibre. The strength of despair was on him when a blow crashed on his head like a thunderbolt out of the darkness, and he dropped a dead weight on his opponent's arms, and lay senseless on the barley.

By the light of their lantern the men raised Tom Ukyn from the pavement and carried him out into the air. He was not dead—that they knew from the faint, flickering pulse in his wrist—and they drew anxiously together to settle what should be done. They were now encumbered by an unconscious body, and the suspicion was strong on Milman that Ukyn was in league with some person or persons who had set him to play the spy on the malting. Even had accident brought the Green Jiner into Rood church he would scarcely have been found lying on the pulpit floor, nor would he have sprung with so much violence on the man who discovered him. The farmer was terribly cast down, for the long and successful carrying out of the illicit business had given him a false security which he now cursed from his soul. He would have paid much to know whether he and his companions had been recognised, but he thought it so uncomfortably probable that he determined to remove every trace of their occupation without delay.

It was not likely that the refilling and carrying

Digitized by Google

away of the sacks could be accomplished by sunrise, but the shovels were brought out hastily and all three addressed themselves to a task that each, secretly, feared to be an impossible one. Milman meant to keep hold of Ukyn, and, when consciousness returned—he dared not so much as picture the alternative—to buy his silence with a share of the autumn's profits and an interest in those to come. He toiled on, spurred by the thought that the wounded man's associates, if he had any, would come to look after their spy. He prayed that they might not already be surrounding the church.

They laid the Green Jiner under one of the stone benches of the porch. They needed all the available space for their work, and the door was left slightly open that they might keep a watch on the prostrate figure in the shadow, while they threw themselves on the task before them.

It was when a good piece of the labour was accomplished that Ukyn opened his eyes and looked foolishly on the dim shine within the open door. Milman had argued, sensibly enough, that, if the place were already surrounded, the fact of its being shut would now save him, while, if it were not, the risk of a chance passer who might be attracted by the chink of light was small enough to be profitably run for the sake of watching Ukyn. The latter did not stir, for his limbs felt heavy and the pain in his head disinclined him for movement; but the cold touch of the stone on which he lay had revived him and a trickle of blood, now drying, had relieved him too. The sounds of sweeping and shovelling revealed to him a situation which, for a few dizzy moments, he could not explain, and as

Digitized by Google

memory came back, holding the events of the last hours like pictures before him, his truant wits began to return.

As soon as his mind was sufficiently clear he tried to review his chances of escape. He would have sat up, but he could make no attempt to do so without rolling into the middle of the porch, because the seat of the low bench was barely half-a-foot above his nose. He did not dare to move lest the men in the church should hear him, and he closed his eyes again without lifting a finger, for the shovelling had ended, and the door was opened wide to let a relay of sacks be brought out. When this was done the three pairs of feet stopped on a level with his head.

"Fetch out the lantern," said Milman. "We 'll have to look at my fine feller."

"Us 'll have to knock him on the head again if he be stirrin'," observed another voice; "good riddance he 'll be too. Sly enough to come to life like Lazarus, that 'e is."

"He 's a bad ooled un—bad descended," said the farmer judicially, as he took the light; "his father before him were the same poachin' thief a' believe."

He bent down as he spoke. Ukyn lay on his side, his cheek against the flags. Milman surveyed him critically.

"Still as Queen Anne," he remarked. "Once the church be cleared we 'll have to settle wi' him. But there 's no time to think of that now. We 'll take a sack apiece this journey; the night's gettin' short."

"But 'e bean't dead?" inquired the man who had not spoken before, rather tremulously.

Digitized by Google

"Dead? Not him, he'll live to see us all hanged, like enough."

And with this gloomy suggestion Milman shouldered his load and the three went out among the tombstones.

Ukyn rolled from under the bench and sat up, holding his head. It throbbed so much that he could scarcely lift it, but he contrived to get on his feet; he had no time to waste, for, if he were not lost in the darkness which lay like a fathomless sea beyond the churchyard wall before they came back, he would be in as sorry a case as ever. It was with intense relief that he found himself able to get on at all, and he went painfully down that side of the mound farthest from the farm to drag his weary body through a hedge and emerge into the open fields. He was going to make the best attempt he could to reach the place in which he had left the excise officer and his crew.

He got into the lane leading directly to it without mishap; now and then he stopped and sat down, for the pain in his head made him sick and fits of shivering impeded him. But he forced himself along with dogged animal endurance; what faults, soever, might be laid to his charge, Tom Ukyn had the qualities of his defects. Turning a corner he nearly fell against a man who was standing with his hand over his ear, by the hedge. At that moment a deathly sickness came upon him and he sat down almost at the man's feet.

While the Green Jiner had been going through such vicissitudes in the cause of righteousness the men in the barn were growing heartily tired of awaiting his return. Every night after moon-set

Digitized by Google

he had left them and departed to keep his watch, and, every night, a couple of hours, at most, brought him back with the news that all was quiet.

But, as time wore on and there was no sign of him, it began to dawn on the exciseman's mind that his emissary might be in difficulties. If no harm were afoot it was strange that he had not retraced his steps as usual, and, if he had actually lit on the miscreants at work, nothing but sheer inability to move would prevent him from hurrying back to give the alarm. Those who had not fallen asleep in the straw were of the excise officer's way of thinking; for, of late, they had seen enough of the inside of the barn to last them for the rest of their lives and any change seemed to them a godsend. It was suggested that they should go forth, not in a body, but one behind the other, leaving an interval, not too wide, for communication, between each person. Thus they could stretch like a string over the country, and the most advanced of the party, should he find anything amiss as he neared the place, could send word back along the whole line.

There was something comic in the excess of caution and solemnity attending the adventure, and, when the foremost man of the band was well-nigh knocked down by the staggering Ukyn, he jumped across the width of the track as though he had met a lion. Then, as he mustered courage to examine the groaning heap and heard the words "Rood church," he set off as fast as he could for the place, calling to the man behind him to hurry his fellows.

The Green Jiner lay where he was while the whole of this expeditionary force passed him, some of it

Digitized by Google

at a walk, some of it running. Occasionally he would hail one or other of the band, but no one took any notice of his fallen comrade, for every one was terrified lest he should be late for the sensational part of the proceedings. The last footstep had died out on its way to the Rood church dingle by the time he dragged himself to his feet once more.

He was in wretched plight. That night he had lain in the chilling grass till his bones were frozen, and it had been desperate work, as he crouched in the pulpit, to keep his teeth from chattering; when the blow on his head had stretched him senseless, the flags of the porch with their oozings of damp green moss were the bed on which he had come back to consciousness. The effort of reaching his friends had cost him nearly all the strength left in his body, and his throat was still bleeding from the violence of his unseen captor's grip; there were purple marks on it and the swelled muscles made him choke as he swallowed. Now that he despaired of seeing the end of his travail, his desire was to get home, for he felt as though he were going to die. The short cuts and obstacles of the country were impossible to him, not only because it was as much as he could do to keep on his legs over the beaten track, but because unexpected chasms had begun to yawn in his memory and he could not always concentrate his mind enough to be sure where he was. His shaking knees knocked together, and he found himself sometimes at one side of the way, sometimes at the other.

Still he pressed on, and it was only when he approached the blackened mounds of Wern and was

Digitized by Google

within a stone's throw of his old home that the world went from him and he fell, face downwards, by the wayside.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SILENT PARTNERSHIP

SARAH UKYN stood on the threshold of her cottage looking out over the Crishowell dingle at the trees on its farther side. The half-perceptible change of early February was on them, though the suppressed tremor of life was, as yet, only felt by animals and plants. To the massive woman, whose eyes ranged over the aspect of that earth from which she drew her livelihood, few changes but the very obvious ones were patent; for, except in rare cases, familiarity and contempt tread closer together the nearer they are to the soil. Though village children may fill their laps with primroses, though they may breathe in the silky scent with delight, and smother themselves with yellow nosegays, by the time their hands are strong enough to grasp sterner loads, winter and soft spring, and the fervour of summer and autumn will be no more to them than four taskmasters setting dissimilar tasks. To see the glory of common things is to speak, as an equal, with life; but we may forget that to different divisions of men different things are common. It is surprising how romantic the digging of the soil will appear to the man who has never dug it.

Digitized by Google

Behind Sarah in the house the afternoon light, at its turn towards evening, fell dimly on the "bedstick" from which she had defied Sir Helbert Bucknall. The recess where it stood was far enough from the deep-set cottage window to hold its contents in shadow, and the outline of Ukyn under the folds of a patchwork counterpane was almost too vague to be suggestive of a human figure.

Seven days had gone by since he was carried home from the hillside, and, for four of them, he had fluctuated between unconsciousness and delirium. Chill, exposure, and hard usage had done their share in overpowering his tough but ill-nourished body, and, though the wounds on his head and neck were almost healed, and the latter hidden by an encroaching beard, he had only just been pronounced out of danger.

He had been well cared for. From Crishowell House small comforts had found their way to the cottage, and a doctor, whose services Sarah had no means of paying for, attended the sick man regularly. Events had moved quickly since he had, perforce, ceased to play an active part in them. He had been put in that position which is, often, the lot of so many better men; for the end he had worked and skulked and bled to attain was, thanks to his efforts, brought about by others. Milman and his companions had been taken, red-handed, by the well-meaning posse which had rushed past him in the lane. While the farmer worked against time with the steady patience of a rather gallant man in extremities, the excited band had crawled, one by one, towards Rood church; and, breasting the mound like a besieging army, let themselves

Digitized by Google

loose on the law-breakers as they filed, loaded, between the headstones to the farm. The excise officer had covered himself with glory and Milman and his henchmen were already snug in Hereford gaol.

Rood Farm, which had been searched from end to end, yielded proofs of a business not begun yesterday, and the whole world of market-day gossips at Llangarth and the small towns, held up dismayed hands at the thought of the perfidious wickedness that had lurked, unrevealed and unrebuked, in its midst.

But on the second market day after these events, the groups round the pillars of Llangarth market-place drew thickly together. Buying or selling, exchange or robbery, none of these everyday things seemed to be the real cause which had brought men, wives, and maidens to the meeting point. On horseback, on foot, and on wheels they had converged upon the little town, but this weekly advance of the agricultural army appeared to have less than usual to do with money making. Beldames and matrons forsook their baskets to attach themselves to any knot composed of more than two persons, and men drew each other by the coat to whisper apart in some backwater of the human pool. An undercurrent of mystery seemed at work below the surface of speech, and no face suggested a free mind even for the burning question of its owner's commercial interests. Men laughed a good deal in the fine old days by the Wye when no one was too grand to go to market and every one knew what jokes would appeal to his neighbour; but only a few boys plied each other with gibes and nudges, and

Digitized by Google

hailed each other after time-honoured fashion with mud or stones.

There were a few missing faces too; for fever had broken out on Sir Helbert's farms, sodden as they were with the moisture draining from the upper levels and surrounding them with stagnant water, and it was stretching its dark arms out towards Crishowell. It had not yet reached the village, but there were marked houses scattered among the fields and four deaths had been added to the list in the preceding week. A Methodist preacher had been buried, a few days since, in the shadow of one of the chapels by the mountain, and his flock hung together, speaking of their loss and wondering whose turn would come next. With the rains of November and the decay of the leaf Aythan had been justified of his words.

Where disaster is concerned, there is, in the rural world, but a step from indifference to panic; and the rural world had not yet begun to move. Crishowell had, so far, not been greatly impressed. The sinister presence that sat, a dim shadow in the creek of the hills, had not yet looked down upon the village. Only a few had raised their heads from their endless staring on the level slough of habit, only a few paused to listen to the warning of what was to come, as men mowing the fields may pause to listen to distant thunder rolling hoarsely on the dun-coloured horizon. The new graves in the churchyard made them shudder as they glanced over the wall and returned to the common round of intemperance and toil. But the thunder rolled on and the Llangarth doctors spoke gravely of the coming spring, and Sir Helbert Bucknall, in his

Digitized by Google

house in Herefordshire, felt that his grievances against Aythan were greater than ever. An impudent young dog is a bad thing, no doubt, but an impudent young prophet is a worse one.

But from tongue to tongue ran a rumour that dwarfed the subject of the common danger, and, in the tide of talk, Aythan's name was tossed like a plank among waves. All Llangarth was astir with the news that a hat belonging to him and a blackthorn stick with the initials A. W. cut upon it had been found in the church. The hat, which bore traces of having been rolled in the barley, was knocked out of shape and had its brim broken. It was said that the reasons given for the presence of these things had been curiously unsatisfactory, and now a perfect storm of conjecture was sweeping the neighbourhood. Why had he taken up his abode at such a place as Rood Farm? Why had he, a gentleman, become a paid servant of that hated character, Sir Helbert Bucknall? The dwellers in the rich valley of the Wye were accustomed to speak of the hill people as though they were a half-civilised race; and that any one who could help it should choose to live among them, exiled from the superior community below, and in surroundings so barren as to be almost indecent, was a suspicious wonder that might be shown to have its darker side. Heads wagged and shook and many eyes followed Sarah Ukyn, who had been able to leave her husband and come down from her cottage to buy a few necessaries for the first time. Ukyn had been conscious for a couple of days, and a small girl was inveigled in to watch him during her absence.

The whole market was as though pervaded by

Digitized by Google

Sarah. Her appearance threw fresh spirit upon the crowd, and, as she passed under the roof of the market-place, a fire of renewed interest sprang up in her steps. Women who despised her character from a sense of duty, and feared her tongue because they could not help it, addressed her civilly, as though she were as necessary to human well-being as themselves. Every word that fell from her lips was listened to, and the dark sayings that she scattered about were passed on to circle round the gathering. What had happened once would happen twice, she said, and if any one doubted it, they had only to look at her man's neck and the marks on his head. What they would see would tell them who was at the bottom of the doings in Rood church. A poor man might go to gaol while some that should be in his place were walking about free. Ah! Tom Ukyn could tell them what he had seen, and would, too, when he got his legs on the ground again! Perhaps gentlefolk threw their hats in at church windows just to show that they were churchgoers, but Tom could tell a different story. She called upon her hearers to mark her words. Wickedness might serve for a bit, but there were some that came like peacocks, who might have to go home like quists.

And now, when she had reached home and stood on her threshold, she saw what was, to her, a finer prospect than the familiar Crishowell dingle. It was not for nothing that she had sat, hour after hour, listening to the confused stream of the Green Jiner's ravings, for she had gathered from them almost as much as he had been able to tell her in the two days since he had recovered his wits. Aythan

Digitized by Google

Waring was as deeply concerned in the illegal malting as the men who were lying in gaol for it. Ukyn had seen him prowling about the church, and though he did not seem to be sure who had half strangled him and who had struck him down, she, Sarah, did not intend to be shaken in her certainty that the aggressor was the young agent himself. She promised herself that she would maintain it in the face of every one. Who knew but that she might yet see her desire upon her enemy?

She turned back into the cottage and bent over her husband. He was sleeping quietly; his nose, sharpened and thinned by illness, looked longer and more pointed than ever against the rough ticking of his uncovered pillow. His beard had grown, covering mouth and chin, and as he lay with closed eyes, breathing regularly, the foxy look he usually wore had given way to something more human. It could hardly be said that Sarah was fond of him; but the continued serving of his interests had made his advantage her most customary thought, and wrought between them a bond of a sort which is often only a little weaker than a bond of affection. In all ranks of life a man plays his own hand while a woman plays somebody else's. And the latter is far the more fascinating occupation of the two.

Sarah cared absolutely nothing for her own sex. Mad Moll was the one member of it with whom she was on terms of anything like friendship. Perhaps the feeling that the crazy creature was outside the pale of life as it was lived in Crishowell village, attracted a character which had no desire for the traditions and conventions of its class. She had

Digitized by Google

been brought more into contact with Jane Dolley than with any other woman, and her attitude towards Jane Dolley was typical of her feeling for the wives and daughters, lights o' love and sweethearts of the men about her. Toleration, half sarcastic, wholly contemptuous, with a complete detachment from their interests; that was what she felt for them all. Her unscrupulous mind was a diversion to herself and a good, serviceable working instrument at the same time. But, while she had too much native jollity to be morose and too much general good humour to be malicious by choice, her enmity, once stirred, was as practical and unrestrained in its operations as one of the fundamental forces of nature.

She took up an odd piece of carpet that was lying about and laid it over Ukyn's feet, for a chill was creeping into the air as the sun hung lower. As she went to shut the door a figure confronted her and Hester Bridges stood before her.

Hester's veil was thrown back and the walk up the steep path to the cottage had brought a flush of colour to her face. She had loosened the fastening of her velvet tippet and a piece of yellow leafless winter jasmine, that grew by the horse-block at Crishowell House, was pinned on her bosom.

"How is your husband?" she inquired, sitting down on the wooden chair at the fireside without looking at the bed. Her skirt rustled as she drew it carefully about her feet.

The floor be a bit dirty, bean't it?" observed Sarah, the corners of her mouth curling upwards. Though her expression was friendly she made none of the usual signs of respect.

Digitized by Google

"Never mind," said Hester.

"'E be sleeping quiet now," said Sarah; "and the doctor says he'll come right enough in time. More 'e do sleep, better 'e 'll be, after that ravin' talk o' his."

"He was delirious, I suppose?"

"'Is tongue were like the clapper of a bell an' his arms were n't far behind it. Layin' about him and fightin', an' me keepin' 'im down, me and Mad Moll. She 've got sense enough for that."

"She is not here now, surely?" asked Hester, throwing a hasty glance round the room.

"By the Lawk! I should not ha' named her to ye, ma'am!" exclaimed Sarah. "I 'd forgotten that she skeered ye."

"Is it true that your husband was employed to watch those men at Rood church?" inquired Hester, unwilling to notice her companion's last words.

"True enough; and if he had seen less he would n't be lyin' there now," replied the other, standing almost threateningly over her. "'E saw more nor 'e were meant to see. But Ukyn is a man can keep a still tongue in his 'ead, an' so can I."

An intent expression came into the lady's face, but only for a moment, for she checked it.

"I should hardly have suspected that, my good creature," she said.

"We do all make mistakes," observed Sarah. "But I 've saved ye from plenty o' they begging folk since I be livin' here by keepin' a shut mouth. No more nor last week there was a man come by; 'Missus,' 'e says, 'can ye show me the way to Crishowell 'Ouse?' I says, 'My dear man,' I says,

Digitized by Google

'*I* don't know the way. I 've never been a mile from a pig's cot.' The man was a stranger, and he did set to laugh. How should *I* know which way to aim the man?"

Sarah did not make the mistake of supposing that philanthropy had brought Mrs. Bridges to her door, for she guessed that the rumours about Aythan had reached her ears. She meant to withhold nothing, in spite of the digressions with which she sought to goad her visitor.

"That 'ard it be to keep the tongue," she went on. "When I was a lump, mother did say if we was quiet an hour a day her'd take us to see the 'mounty-bags' behind 'The Cow' at Crishowell feast. They used to ride round the field, back o' the inn, in bags. A penny to pay. That's the truth. Ah! good times they were when we was ——"

Hester rose impatiently in the middle of the sentence and went towards the bed. Ukyn lay on his back, his head turned to the wall.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing to his uncovered neck.

Sarah's tiny eyes gleamed suddenly. She said nothing, but fixed her look on Hester with the compelling intelligence of one who, having found the answer to a riddle, waits for his neighbour to find it too.

"Whose mark be that, do ye think?" she demanded, coming closer. "Who's got that spite agin' my poor Tom that 'e can't keep his 'ands off him?"

As she spoke she took hold of Hester's arm.

"Don't touch me!" cried the other, shaking her off; she drew her handkerchief out and held it to

Digitized by Google

her lips. Its corner brushed the little cluster of naked jasmine. The sprig fell on Ukyn's hand which lay, palm uppermost, on the counterpane. He stirred in his sleep, and, turning over, opened his eyes.

"'Ere be the lady from Crishowell 'Ouse," said his wife.

Hester stepped back.

"I fear you have suffered a great deal," she said, not unsympathetically.

He made no reply.

"This be Madam Bridges," continued Sarah, in a louder voice.

"What do ye want?" asked the sick man, raising himself a little.

"I want to know how you came by your wounds," burst out Hester. "I want the whole story. I have heard that you were sent as a spy to Rood church. But there is more—I know there is. Go away, woman!" she cried, turning upon Sarah; "why do you stand there? I must have the truth—don't stand staring at me!"

"'E 'll tell you the truth fast enough," replied Sarah, without moving.

"Go, I tell you!" she cried.

It was as though Hester had thrown off a mask. She had entered the cottage a self-contained, conventionally-mannered woman, wrapped in the suggestion of indifferent calm that she carried about with her. It was like a cold belt of atmosphere dividing her from a world in which people toiled and loved and suffered; it prevented the unimaginative from remembering that, inside the chilly zone, she might, after her fashion, be toiling and loving

Digitized by Google

and suffering too. She felt as though she must suffocate. The constraint of months and years had her in its weary accustomed thrall, and a force whose strength she feared, but could not arrest, was carrying her beyond the bounds set for her by self-respect, by propriety, by all she believed in. The humiliation of the inward struggle was dreadful to her, for she felt that the woman was watching her, was listening to the restraint ebbing from her voice, was aware of what was in her heart. It was horrible to think that, at any moment, this plebeian creature might overstep the barrier between them and join her vulgar hate to the secret springs of her own anguish of feeling. She knew that, morally, there was nothing to choose between them, and that, turning, she would see that knowledge reflected in Sarah's face. She knew that Sarah was aware of what had brought her to the bedside of this Esau among men, this rascal whose hand was against every man. She had come to feed her hatred and to rake among the mean experiences of the semi-outcast pair for an evil weapon wherewith to strike at Aythan. She understood herself completely, and she saw that Sarah had understood her always.

She looked round, desperately, but Sarah's eyes avoided her and were intent upon the Green Jiner. "Speak up to the lady, Tom," she said.

And with these words she went out, shutting the door.

For a few moments neither Ukyn nor Hester spoke. Then she drew the wooden chair to his bedside and sat down.

"Well?" she said at last, leaning forward.

Digitized by Google

Sarah, standing outside, her feet on the mat of dried bracken, her ear to the door, heard the voice begin, haltingly at first, but running on in the silence of the cottage.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ANGEL

"And so no one knew what had happened to you when Milman was caught?" said Hester, when Ukyn had finished speaking.

"They did n't wait to hear, not they. What did they care about the like of me when they was runnin' to the church?"

And the Green Jiner went into details of his own condition at the time, which, on any other occasion, would have disgusted his hearer.

"But how do you know—how can you be sure that it was Mr. Waring who attacked you?" she asked. "What made you suppose that it was he more than any one else? Was there enough light from the lantern for you to distinguish his face?"

"He were prowlin' round the church as soon as the moon went down. It 's not the first time he 's tried his luck at killin' me. I 've got them marks on my neck still under the new ones, and Sarah did hear tell in Llangarth market that his stick were found lying on the floor o' the church covered wi' blood. I 've seen him times out o' number wi' that blackthorn."

"But did you see his face?" persisted Hester.

"And he 'll get off free, for all that," continued

Digitized by Google

Ukyn. His hollow voice had weakened from the strain of talking and he lay back, fixing his look beyond her.

She glanced over her shoulder, nervously. She could have shaken him, feeble as he was.

"But his face, you saw his face?" she exclaimed, leaning over him.

"It were nobody but him," said Ukyn, turning his head to the wall with weary impatience.

She bit her lips.

"Of course; I understand that. And if you are ready to swear that you saw his face you will get justice. The remedy is in your own power."

"I did n't see it; leastways, I were n't sure. But I do know that grip anywhere."

"That is no use!" cried she, pushing back her chair and rising; "no one will accept such an assertion as that!"

She began to walk up and down the cottage. The sick man lay silent. He was worn out, and any feeling that he had was swallowed up by fatigue and the fretful desire for peace.

At the sharp scrape of the chair over the floor Sarah came in. So directly were the minds of the two women upon the matter in hand that they acted in absolute concert. To both it was a simple fact that Hester had come on an errand which little became her; but it was the mere culmination of what had begun weeks before, and its tacit acceptance was the only thing possible.

She was standing in the middle of the room when Sarah entered, and, at sight of the round face in the doorway, there came to Hester again the bitter consciousness of her own loss of dignity. But it

Digitized by Google

only drove her forward; for shame alone, shame that contains not the germ of regeneration for which it is the appointed soil, is the most deadly influence that can attack a human spirit.

For a moment Hester could not speak. There was an angry fire in her look. She went over to the hearth as people will who feel the need of a point of vantage.

"Your husband's story will not be of much use to him," she said with scorn.

"Indeed, nothing be o' much use to poor folk," rejoined the other calmly; "we 've got to take what we get an' say no more."

"That is not what I mean!" exclaimed Hester; "what I mean is that he does not even know who struck him down. That is not what you led me to believe."

"And so you 've come up 'ere for nothin'," said Sarah.

Hester's bosom swelled. If the insolent meaning behind these words made her degradation complete, she yet clung to the shadow of her self-respect.

"What do you mean, woman?" she cried fiercely. "Do you imagine that your concerns are of any matter to me? Do you suppose anything but the fact of your being my dependents brings me to this place?"

Sarah saw that she had gone too far; but she was not one who, having gained a position, would retreat from it, and she remained silent. She was certain enough of her companion to be assured that she would not leave the cottage.

Though Hester knew that, now, each moment spent under Sarah Ukyn's roof was an insult

Digitized by Google

offered by herself to herself, she could not move. She had come to a turning point in that inner history which is the only true history of every human being, and which often differs so much from its outward manifestations as to give no sign by which the curious may read it. Pride bid her go, but pride knows many tunes, and there was an undertone in its voice that sang derision to the man or woman who, having put a hand to the plough, looks back.

She turned towards the little window, which the advance of evening had changed into a square of transparent blue-green peace, set jewel-like, in the wall. The top of the bare wood on the opposite side of the Crishowell dingle was visible on the lower half of the pane, a broad sweep against the colour. And, like a crystalline flame suspended in the melting space, a planet burned with silver fire above the world. The picture she saw was far away, eternal. It would be immutable when she and her like were mere components of the sod. The impersonal immensity of creation, the foreboding of eternity, were dreadful to her in this moment. The sight of vast natural solemnities which awakes in some that longing for absorption into the highest, that desire which, because it is only half understood, is akin to pain, brought her nothing but menace. The very majesty before her threw her more passionately back upon herself.

A craving took her for human aims, for contact with human personalities and concerns, for familiar interests, lesser things. Yes, she would be dead while that watcher in the sky stood year-long, age-long, looking down on the valley in which Aythan's

Digitized by Google

descendants—not hers—would be living and dying too; when there would be no one, perhaps, to whom the names of herself and Eustace would convey so much as a tradition, an old wife's tale. A rebellious terror of impermanence shook her soul, and even the common, shrewd, gross woman standing with her in the room grew less repugnant to her because she had the homely warmth of humanity.

She would fight with fate, she told herself. She must die, she must become dust, but, before her time came, she would have her own share of love and know the ties that should bind her and Eustace irrevocably to the soil on which they trod. Death would scarce be death while there were those living who should carry on their name and their memory with the inheritance of the land. And the wide sweep of her thoughts brought her back again to the figure which stood, barring her way —Aythan.

She fastened her tippet as though she would go.

"Tom knows well enough." Sarah's voice came, with slow emphasis, out of the dusk.

"Then why did he lie to me? Who can get at the truth in such a nest of untruths? Whom am I to believe? One of you is lying. Ah! how often have I heard that nobody can trust you working people, that you will hide one day what you will own the next, that no one can understand your motives but the father of lies himself!"

"I tell ye, Tom knows."

Hester struck her hands together.

"It is impossible to hope for justice when no

Digitized by Google

one will speak out. Can *nothing* make you understand that?" she cried.

"We be too poor for justice," said the other. "'T is only 'igh folk that can buy it."

"Oh—as to that——" broke in Hester.

"The truth will be there, never fear," said Sarah. "I can make him speak up, an' I 'll undertake to do it. 'T is a sight o' work to make Tom do anything, but, by the Lawk! if an angel wi' a money bag in his fist was to come flyin' down like a turkey out o' 'eaven to offer it me for my pains, I would n't say 'no' to 'im! I 'd say, 'I 'll take it, sir, thankin' your reverend worship for your trouble!' I would."

"Even that would be useless," rejoined Hester with a sneer. "Unless Ukyn was certain whose face he saw at Rood church—*and would swear to it*—the angel himself could do no good. There would have to be no half measures—no half certainties, I mean. Do you understand me?" she asked, her intent eyes set fiercely on those of her companion.

The light was so dim that she could hardly see Sarah's expression. The breathing of the Green Jiner, who slept, was the only sound to break the dead silence that followed. Neither of the women heard it; the sick man was a cipher to one and had become a pawn to the other.

"Do you really mean what you say?" said Hester at last.

"Not much doubt o' that," replied the other shortly.

"If——" began Hester, and then stopped because of the beating of her heart. Also, she did

Digitized by Google

not know how to put the proposal hovering on her tongue into words.

The other was as rigidly still as a cat at a mouse-hole.

"Is this the truth—the real truth?"

Among Sarah's possessions was a battered Bible. Ill-usage, rather than use, had turned it into a discoloured bundle of damp printed matter. She reached it down from the litter of tallow-dip ends and rubbish that covered a shelf and held it out to her companion.

"You take it, ma'am. Supposin' you was the angel, I 'd put my 'and on it an' swear to it that Ukyn would speak out."

Hester sprang back. Her lips were white and it was as though she had heard the waters waiting to close in on her soul roaring in her ears.

"Take it away! I will not touch it!" she cried.

And turning, she groped for the door.

Hester descended the slope a few moments later, her delicately-shod feet impeded by the roughness of the ground. Her heart still beat violently. Her body was weary, but her spirit was like a cloud driven before the winds and without a resting-place either in earth or sky. The face of every object she saw seemed to her terrible; as terrible as the dark door of her own conscience. The fear of solitude was on her, yet she would have fled to the nearest shelter to avoid the most homely fellow-creature. She felt as though a chance word addressed to her by the first yokel she might meet would tempt her lips to reveal the presence of the dreadful guest she harboured in her bosom. All her hatred of Aythan Waring could not make her

Digitized by Google

suppose him to have had any part with Milman or to have countenanced the dishonest enterprise which Ukyn had discovered. She was morally certain that he had not been in Rood church while the malting was going on, and, that being the case, she could not really believe the truth of what she meant to go to desperate lengths to prove.

She stood in the crystal light of the February evening, uncertain which way to take. Eustace was away and her needy gentlewoman was now her only companion at Crishowell House, but the thought of this lady's placid countenance and habit of asking irrelevant questions made her almost ready to scream aloud. The lights would be lit in the rooms, the curtains drawn, the shutters closed; at least, out here in the chill clarity bathing the landscape, there was breathing space.

She turned down towards the brook whose voice she could hear rising from the trees at the bottom of the dingle; the way was muddy, but she went on till she found herself on the grass-grown path that ran parallel with its course to the village. There was something friendly in the sheltering growth of oak and hazel which hid the water and crowded on her as though to hide her also. It was damp in this spot and much chillier than on the higher ground, but she did not heed that. She would not have chosen such a loitering place at another time, for, in these days when the early year, in spite of its light evenings and its awakening vitality, was dimmed by the fever-cloud hanging over the valley, she was aware that chills and low levels were to be avoided. She had often impressed the need for caution on Eustace, and was almost sorry that he

Digitized by Google

would return from London, where he had been for a couple of weeks, on the morrow.

She walked to and fro, aimlessly, like one in pain, the pure solace of movement compelling her steps. The whistling of a boy reached her from the fields above the gush of the gliding brook, and she listened with parted lips, and then went deeper in among the hazels like an animal pursued. They grew thick about her, and, when she found her passage barred, she stopped, leaning against a stem.

The possibilities that swam before Hester Bridges had more definite issues than the mere gratification of a woman's spite, nurtured in the shallow soil of dislike and miscomprehension. Dislike alone could not have roused the passion that scourged her towards a goal on which she had scarcely courage to look. The rumour coupling Aythan's name with Milman's misdeeds had brought her a fierce satisfaction that she would have been ashamed to confess to any one but Eustace, but it was something more terrible, more sinister, which had taken her to Ukyn's bedside this afternoon. Though it was only a few hours since Sarah had electrified the market-place by her indictment of Aythan, her tongue had already been busy among her neighbours. While professedly looking down upon her, some of these had been lured by curiosity to make inquiries for the sick man at the cottage door, and to them she had spoken freely, with the result that her words had been carried from the outdoor to the indoor servants of Crishowell House. Hester's maid had blurted the story to her mistress, fearing to be cut

Digitized by Google

short, yet unable to deny herself the venturesome joy.

The woman's tale had stayed with its hearer in her waking hours and was not banished while she slept; the fact that she did not believe it could not take her mind from the scene described by Sarah and embellished by every person through whose mouth it had passed. She might have accepted it as truth if its background had been different, but she was certain, in spite of herself, that the young man could have taken no part in the malting. The idea of his making a murderous attack upon Ukyn was not, to her, an incredible one, though she knew that he could not have done so in the church were he not implicated in the acts taking place under its roof. But she would not admit that, this being so, the Green Jiner and his wife were, in all probability, fabricating a malicious lie; that, though there was no doubt about the rough handling the man had received, he was fathering it upon an innocent person. It was not her business to know more than she was told, and, with this excuse to herself, she had climbed the slope in order to hear what she could from the fountain head.

One thought, so hideous that Hester feared it while she harboured its presence, had whispered to her ever since she listened to her maid's story. The high-coloured description of the assault had recalled to her mind an episode that had taken place a few months earlier in western England, when passion, jealousy, those ordinary ingredients of love-tragedies, had combined to take a pair of labourers from their obscurity and made them the centre of public excitement. One of these men had

Digitized by Google

lain in wait and attacked his rival in the dusk as the latter returned from the house of the woman whom both loved. He had leaped upon him and there had been a struggle at the wayside. No weapon had been used, the aggressor, who was the more muscular of the two, trusting to those which God had given him and almost choking the breath out of his enemy. A chance passer had intervened and he had fled; but the whole countryside had been stirred up by the trial that followed his capture, for he was young and popular, and a member of a respectable family. He had been deceived by the woman, who was a harlot, and cheated by the man, who was a scoundrel; but, in spite of petitions, the recovery of the victim and the high feeling of three counties, he had been hanged at Shrewsbury under the new Act of 1829, which made "unlawfully and maliciously attempting to strangle," a capital offence. The mob had tried to kidnap the hangman on the evening before the execution, and, baulked of its will, had wrecked the house of the woman to whom the condemned man was engaged. The case was the first to come under the new law.

Hester was pinioned in the black shroud that the suggestive memory of this story was wrapping round her spirit. The Valley of the Shadow into which her fascinated gaze was directed appalled her; but, beyond it, in the light, she saw a region in which she and Eustace and their children's children dwelt, secure and content. How often has that parable of humanity, its feet on the dread brink, its eyes fixed, in hope, on its own divine emergence beyond it, been woven about the dying bed of the body! Now, the temptation which seemed like to

Digitized by Google

be the death of Hester's soul, was illuminated by a promised radiance, further on, that glowed before the unhappy woman.

She crouched against the root of the slender hazel and the brook shrieked in her ears. She hid her face. Was not everything she looked at hostile? There was nothing, surely, in heaven or earth that had any pity for her; pity was a thing she had never yet wished for, but her nerves were quivering and she felt that she must keep her head lest she should cry out her inmost thoughts and the wind carry them abroad.

She raised herself and looked up. High above, in a parting of the boughs, the star she had seen through the cottage window was watching. To her, as she stood deep in the cleft of the dingle, it was doubly conspicuous, as though seen from the bottom of a well. The damp exhaled by the low-lying spot hung in vapour over bushes and brushwood, and, through its breath, the planet shed a weeping trail of light downwards. It beamed and trembled, the pulsating flashes now blue, now shot with a translucent spangle of green. It had found her out again. Its argent lances were pointed at her, through the branches, through the ether, through everything that came between her and its accusing shafts. She hurried from the place, stumbling among the roots and the soaking mat of grass; not pausing till she had reached home and closed the door upon the twilight.

Eustace, returning next day, found her pale and drawn. Her eyes were heavy, for the few night hours that had brought her sleep had been tortured by dreams. She had changed a good deal, he

Digitized by Google

thought, in the last year, and not in looks alone. In the old days he had never remarked a suggestion of hidden force which was beginning to reveal itself to him now. He wondered whether he should ever lose his ascendency over her.

She was strangely unresponsive to-day, though he had found her waiting at the door as he rode up from the coach. He had breakfasted early, and, while he dined, she kept him company and laid her burden of news before him. The rumours about Aythan could not but interest him. They sat long at the table while she described to him some part of her visit to Ukyn; she did not describe it all. She wondered whether he remembered the story of the two labourers; they had talked a good deal about it at the time of its occurrence, as everybody in the western counties had done. If it had passed from his mind she was not going to bring it back.

Later, he found her at her writing-table and she rose as he watched her, tearing the letter she had written and strewing its scraps on the fire. She came and sat down by him on the sofa.

"Eustace," she said, clasping her heavy white hands and pressing them against his knee, "will you do something for me?"

"My dear creature, yes. Why not?"

"I want it done to-day—now, Eustace."

"What is it?"

"Only a message to Mrs. Ukyn."

"My dear Hester, surely a servant can go. I have not been three hours in the house yet."

"No, no; you said you would do it. Servants never repeat things exactly as they are told them."

Digitized by Google

He got up rather impatiently. "Well, if I must, I must. What am I to say to the woman?"

"Tell her, if she will do as she prom—as she said, yesterday, I will act as the angel. She will understand you perfectly."

Eustace's eyebrows rose. The high-flown futility of the words increased his irritation at being compelled to go out when he wished to stay in.

"But what do you mean?" he said.

"I tell you she will understand. Do you think me so unlike one?" she exclaimed with mirthless coquetry.

More than ever was he struck by the misgiving which made him, self-confident and careless as he was, feel almost like a child in the dark when she was in certain moods.

"What is all this about, Hester?" he asked. "What have you to do with these people?"

"Oh, please go!" she exclaimed, urging him towards the door.

He turned to speak again, but she was gone.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXV

"THE PLACE OF DRAGONS"

It is not only the virtuous who have to endure the ironic attitude of life. Since Hester had sent her message by Eustace she had heard what she did not suspect when she made the overtures to her bargain in the cottage; namely, that the Green Jiner would be called as a witness by the Crown in Milman's impending trial. Then only did she realise that husband and wife would have every opportunity of injuring the man to whom they owed their evil times. She might as well have spared herself. Without her influence they would be ready to go to all lengths, and she had herself alone to thank for a situation which appalled her. She had trailed her honour—secretly indeed, but none the less effectually—under the feet of Sarah Ukyn, for an advantage already within her grasp.

Her resolution had been so hardly come by that she feared, in some moment of weakness, to retreat from it, and the ten pounds demanded by Sarah had been given a day before the news of Aythan's arrest came to ring in her ears like the echo of a returned curse. She would now give her right hand to retrace every step of the road along which she had forced herself. She would sit by her

Digitized by Google

bedroom fire, dull and pale, shunning even Eustace. She hardly knew which fear was the greater, the fear of what she had done or the fear that the Ukyns would play her false. It might well be that they would do so, should any circumstance arise to tempt them; and there would be no redress. She would have to keep her lips closed and suffer the derision of the hateful creatures who had outwitted her until she could find a pretext for driving them off her land. She had little fear of their possible accusations, for there had been no witness to the agreement Sarah made with her, and the money had been paid in gold from resources laid by in her private purse. Whatever they might choose to say, they could prove nothing and their word would be nothing against her own.

The reason that her marriage was deferred till April was a satisfactory one. Her aunt Mary, whose criticism of her position had once provoked Eustace, was now standing forth as her champion. Hester's relations never knew what their aunt Mary might do; they could only guess that it would be something which disagreed with them generally. The old lady, being rich, was accustomed, each April, to remove herself to London from Bath, and she wrote to her niece, telling her that if the wedding was fixed in London for that month, she would give the ceremony the sanction of her presence, the bride a wedding breakfast, and the bridegroom an opportunity of meeting his new connections. Hester suspected these latter of knowing better than to refuse that opportunity, for Aunt Mary was a despot and her sceptre a golden one.

And, now that all was going well, now that she

Digitized by Google

was to have her heart's desire, she would have given anything, short of its fulfilment, to unburden her soul of its torment and to lay on some one's shoulder a corner of the ghastly load she had bound upon her own. But there was only Eustace to whom she could speak. She scarcely dared to be alone with him for fear that the impulse to confession should overmaster her. She knew Eustace better than she had ever known any one, though she understood him less; and, while she was aware that no affection for Aythan would sway him, instinct told her that the act would be the end of her happiness.

A lurid atmosphere had wrapped itself round the countryside. For changeless years this slow-going bit of the Wye valley had known no forward march but the march of the seasons, no experiences save the ordinary births, lives, and burials of its inhabitants. Fever, prison, strife, death: these were the topics on men's tongues now, and the shapes that haunted their stagnant imaginations. The news from Hereford had become the thing for which Crishowell village lived.

The developments that had followed the appearance of Milman and his associates before the justices of the peace in Llangarth had shaken the whole of Herefordshire and Breconshire. Any breach of the excise laws had a strong interest for the world in those days, and the unusual surroundings of Milman's illegal practices, the sacrilegious smack of a misdemeanour that had a church for its background, strengthened the hold which the affair had taken in the minds of the lookers-on.

It was a serious offence that had been committed

Digitized by Google

and the culprits had been caught in the act by the excise officers. But, bad as that might be, there was a yet more desperate crime to be dealt with, for the spy assisting the revenue had been almost done to death and carried upon him the marks of the savage attack. The Green Jiner had identified his assailant as Aythan Waring, and his statement was, in itself, enough to justify criminal proceedings. And, to bear out the truth of his accusation, the young man's hat, knocked out of shape by violence and covered with wet barley, had been found near his blood-stained blackthorn stick, in the church.

Milman and his accomplices did not volunteer to give evidence and they were not called as witnesses by the Crown, though their sworn statements might have farther corroborated Ukyn. The prosecuting officials were not anxious to put them in the witness-box because their evidence would be subject to the adverse comment that they were fixing the blame on another man in order to save their own skins; and Aythan's attorney, knowing well that they would not incriminate themselves, even to save an innocent man, could not run the risk of calling them for the defence. Perhaps it was hardly to be expected that they would fit the halter round their own necks in order to rescue Sir Helbert Bucknall's agent; and the result of their reticence was that Aythan Waring was being tried, under the act which had lately become law, for "wilfully and maliciously attempting to strangle Thomas Ukyn with intent to murder." The working-class was fiercely divided as to his deserts. That portion of his own which knew him either personally or by

Digitized by Google

hearsay only remembered that he stood under the shadow of the gallows.

Sir Helbert Bucknall had established himself in The Green Dragon at Hereford. For the first time in his experience the surly old man found his whole mind centred in the fortunes of another person; one, moreover, who had often disagreed with him and never flattered him.

The hard shell that, for so many years, had grown upon Sir Helbert, the effect of prosperity, continuous and unshared, narrow interests, unbroken custom, was beginning to give way. Perhaps he was getting too old to maintain the aggressive tenacity of resistance to all points of view but his own; for he was nearing seventy-five, and, of late, the strange suggestion had come to him—why, he could not tell—that he had not made the most of his life. He was not inclined to retrospections, but they rose before him now as he ate his solitary meals in the inn dining-room during the breathing spaces of the court's daily sittings. From these last he was never absent. He had the usual vast acquaintance of the well-known country landowner, but he was not popular and there was no man to offer him his company, nor to receive a request for it from him without surprise. Retrospect did not seem to cheer him much as he sat at his accustomed table. He leaned his bullet head, with its fringe of white hair, on his hand, as he thought of Aythan, whose days, possibly the last of his life, were being spent in court or behind the sullen walls of the gaol. He had heard some gossip lately about his agent and Miss Troup; it was said that he was in love with her, and to some purpose, too.

Digitized by Google

Whether this was true or not he did not know; but of one thing he was quite sure, and that was that the man he had met at Tillestone was in the same plight when he saw him. He had only lately heard of Eustace's engagement, and he hoped devoutly that, before making it, he had given her the chance of refusing him. The girl was one of the principal witnesses for the defence. He did not know what to think of it all. He was inclined to admire Barbara, and he felt that, if she could but save Waring, his admiration would be boundless.

Only two women had held serious places in Sir Helbert's life; one whom he had loved, but who had not loved him, and one to whose love he had been indifferent. Between these two he had missed everything. He felt old and shaken. He had growled at Aythan and cursed him and gone against him; and he was now finding out, too late, that he had never liked any one so much. He had bullied him, or tried to do so, as a matter of course; it was his way of approaching everybody; and his perverse pleasure in it had been the greater because the man was a gentleman and one to whom the receiving of orders was new. But there was a point beyond which he could not venture with his agent, and the reception his half-contemptuous offer of a higher salary had met with among the falling hovels of Wern had shown him where it lay. He knew that, though his unwilling respect for him had dated, practically, from their first acquaintance, his liking had begun from that hour. And, here also, the good relationship possible had been missed, like so much else. He knew it, now that he might never have a word with him again, nor see

Digitized by Google

his face but as he saw it daily, white and steady, across the packed court-house.

He looked with grudging wistfulness at the groups by the street corners as they stood talking of the trial and of Aythan's chances of life; it would lessen the weight of his unconfessed anxiety could be but find some one with whom to discuss this crisis, not from the more or less detached point of view, but from the personal and agonising one that had become his own. Once he had seen Barbara pass in the street, and he had longed to stop the chaise in which she sat, and pour out to her his fears and the bitterness of his lonely suspense; hoping for the sympathy he had never yet consciously desired from any one. But he had caught a glimpse of her face, and, though unskilled in reading expressions, he could see, by her look, that she had no thought, scarcely even recognition, for any person or subject but the one in her mind. She had turned towards him, as he took off his hat, without seeing him, though they were but a few yards apart. On the next day but one the case for the defence was expected to begin.

The court rose daily at five o'clock, and the old man had returned to his inn and sat looking into the street, which was bathed in the clear light of the March evening. The mildness of the air caused the passers to move so slowly that their words came to him through the open casement. There was only one subject, seemingly, for everybody.

For most of the day the Green Jiner had been in the witness-box, and he had left with his evidence unshaken by the cross-examination of the opposing

Digitized by Google

counsel. He had sworn without hesitation to Aythan's identity with the man whose violence had disabled him in the church, and the marks on his neck had borne testimony to the determined character of the assault. Those whose sympathies were with the defence had left the court with heavy hearts this evening. The counsel for the prosecution had led them, day by day, through a very stoneyard of circumstances that were building themselves into a definite, solid structure. Piece by piece the fabric of Aythan's guilt had risen before them, and it was beginning to look as though nothing could destroy it—the hat, battered and broken, with every mark of rough usage on it; the stick bearing his initials which had been found near the hat on the church floor; his bed, unslept-in on the night of the exciseman's raid. No one had seen him return to the farm, and the servant who found his pillow uncreased when she entered in the morning had met him on the doorstep, dressed and shaved. As this evidence was brought, bit by bit, to light, there were those, even among his supporters, who did not know what to think. And Ukyn was unshakable.

Perhaps Sir Helbert's normal standpoint of being in opposition had helped to keep his faith alive through the days of the trial; be that as it may, nothing he had heard had effected a change in his feelings or beliefs; the private sitting-room he had hired at The Green Dragon was littered with unanswered business letters, but he had not the energy to attend to them. His mind was still in the court-house.

As a waiter came in bringing a note he took it

Digitized by Google

mechanically. It contained no more than a line, hastily written.

"SIR,

"May I see you privately for a few moments.

"BARBARA TROUP."

"The lady is down-stairs, Sir Helbert," said the waiter.

But Sir Helbert had pushed past him and was on his way to the hall. There could have been, at that moment, no more acceptable visitor; but when the old man confronted Barbara his natural ungraciousness of manner was accentuated by his surprise.

"Come up-stairs, madam," said he shortly, leading the way.

They entered the sitting-room and he pushed forward a chair. Barbara sat down and put back the veil in which her face was shrouded. Every vestige of colour had gone from her cheek and her lips were more strangely red by contrast. Her eyes were heavy and there was a light in them that was almost fierce.

"Sir Helbert," she said simply, "I am in great distress. I have not even an acquaintance in Hereford, but I heard that you were here and I have been bold enough to come to you for help."

"Then, ma'am," said the old man, frowning, "you have done perfectly right."

"Ah—h!" she exclaimed, drawing in her breath. And, for a moment, her brave look wavered.

"I must speak plainly and tell you everything," she began. "Unless—if—Aythan Waring lives I am going to marry him. No one knows that but

Digitized by Google

my father. He asked me, Sir Helbert, and I promised him an answer, but, before I could give it, it was too late. He never came for it. He does not know, even now."

A tremor ran through her last words, rising against them as the swelling undulations of stirred water rise against the rushes of the shore. She paused and hid her face for a moment.

"My dear—my dear," said Sir Helbert, stretching out a clumsy hand.

"And now," she went on again, "my father has brought me here because I have to give evidence. But when they have finished with me he insists upon going home. He says that nothing will induce him to stay a day longer, for he is uncomfortable in the rooms he has taken."

"Why does he not come here?" broke in Sir Helbert.

"He dislikes the noise of a hotel. Oh, Sir Helbert! I *cannot* go! How could I live at Tillestone in this suspense, so far from news, not here to know how the case goes on, nor what is happening to him?"

The old man got up and began pacing about the room.

"That is what I have come to you for," continued Barbara. "I have come to ask if you know no one who would, in charity, take me in. Oh, sir! your good word might help me out of this dreadful position—this nightmare, and it may be—it may be—the last time that anything can ever help me again! I would refuse to go home and stay where we are now if I had the money to pay for my lodging, but it is useless to ask my father for it. He

Digitized by Google

would not give it me—the whole matter has upset him so much."

Sleepless nights had worn Barbara's high spirit. Though courage burned on in her and would, no doubt, burn to the end, her nerves began to play her false. She had come to her uncouth champion, asking help as a queen might demand it, but she was ending her quest as a mere woman, helpless in despair.

Sir Helbert came and stood over her as she sobbed. His cross-grained heart was aching so heavily that, with all a man's horror of tears, he almost envied her their transitory relief.

"Don't, don't, ma'am!" he exclaimed, distress forcing him to take covert with the formality he had left behind; "my dear young lady, only believe me, you shall not go—not if I have to hire the whole of The Green Dragon for you! But I must try to do better than that. Come, come; now dry your eyes."

She obeyed, checking her tears with a violent effort and drawing her veil about her face.

He turned to the window and stood looking into the street, his head sunk between his round shoulders. It was the most unlikely tangle in which he had ever found himself taken. His relationships with his kind were so unlike those of his contemporaries. He had so many acquaintances, so few friends. He had succeeded in getting a good deal that he wanted in his time, but only because he was in a position to make compliance worth the while of smaller fry than himself. Though he had threatened to appropriate the whole of The Green Dragon as a shelter for Barbara,

Digitized by Google

what he knew to be necessary was the protection and good-will of some woman of standing in the town.

He had quarrelled with the dean, and the bishop was away. Small sympathy between himself and the clergy; he had no acquaintance in the cathedral close strong enough to warrant his asking hospitality for the girl from any of the blameless ladies its precincts contained. But, whatever his difficulties, he would see that she was not condemned to the isolation of Tillestone while the awful issues of the trial were undetermined; if she meant to disobey her father he would help her to do it; and his contempt for the fantastic and "frenchified" person he understood Mr. Troup to be would have lent pleasure to the matter, had there been no other incentive. He wished that he could see his way more clearly.

But, as he gazed across the road, cursing fate, his helplessness, and the unsympathetic world, the solution of his perplexities was approaching on the opposite pavement. As Mr. Stotson, the elder, came within range of the windows of "The Green Dragon" an exclamation broke from Sir Helbert, and, bidding Barbara, await his return, he hurried down-stairs. In another moment, he had laid a detaining hand upon the lawyer.

The two men walked up and down the street, talking. "You are very eloquent, Sir Helbert," said Stotson, at last. "If you will come back to the house with me and try your skill on my wife, you may be sure I shall back you heartily."

Barbara watched them disappear together, her heart beating. It was dusk, and she sat at her

Digitized by Google

post listening to every sound and every step on the stairs. When Sir Helbert opened the door she sprang up.

"Here is a letter from Mrs. Stotson," he said, twitching his mouth into a smile as he held out a folded note.

He left her, a short time afterwards, at her father's door and she parted from him with a sense of loss. She had begged him not to forget her while she stayed at Mrs. Stotson's house and he had promised to go there daily. Only sheer friendlessness could have driven her to appeal to him, and the mediævally named inn had been a veritable "place of Dragons" for her as she entered it.

But in its precincts, she had found Saint George.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LONG DAY

Mr. Troup was as good as his word. The evening of the day which saw his daughter's last appearance in the witness-box saw his carriage roll along the road to Tillestone with himself inside it. He was heartily pleased to turn his back on Hereford. He had scarcely opposed Barbara's decision though he had spoken very ungenially of it; while Sir Helbert and Mrs. Stotson seemed willing to assume some of the responsibilities he liked so little, he felt that he had no interest in gainsaying them. Barbara had insisted upon his seeing Sir Helbert, and, though he had excused himself from waiting upon Mrs. Stotson, on the plea of ill-health, he had written her a letter of thanks; not a cordial production, but one which did not lack the grace and good taste never absent from his handiwork. As a bend in the way revealed the distant picture of the city he had just left, he could look at it with eyes that saw, not the long-drawn agony fighting itself out within its walls, not the dead-looking mass of its gaol, but his own sitting-room with its treasures and comforts rising like a mirage, one robbed of its scurvy trick of retreating when pursued. He was not a miser in the accepted sense;

Digitized by Google

but he had all the avarice of feeling that belongs to selfishness. He was not generous enough to be willing to pay his share of the strain of life.

At the edge of the whirlpool which had drawn this group of lives into its vortex, three only stood apart. Clarence Troup, Mad Moll, and Hester Bridges, to these came the echoes of the tumult; floating over the green country to one who would not listen, to one who could not understand, to the third, who knew not whether to shut her ears in anguish or to strain them to catch the sound of a conflict that was to bring her success.

Hester's smallest inclinations were in revolt against her peace. She wished fervently to leave Crishowell and was yet chained to the place by terrors both definite and unnamed. She was alone with her pale remnant of genteel spinsterhood, for Eustace was at Hereford, where he had been since the beginning of the trial. A longing to turn away from everything around her wore her out. There was no familiar room in Crishowell House, and no accustomed glimpse of the scenes without, that was not, to her, a remembrance of desires that had delivered her bound to powers she did not know. She could not go.

And now the slow days had trailed by, heavy with the burden of a man's fate, and the last scene of the trial was being played out. A messenger had come from Eustace on the preceding evening to tell her that there would be only one more sitting of the court, and that she might expect him late on the following day. He would leave Hereford on horseback as soon as the verdict had been given.

Digitized by Google

She stood on the steps which led from the drawing-room window to the garden. It was a mild day, but she was wrapped in her thickest winter cloak, for she was cold from the heart outwards, and her fingers had trembled since she left her bed. "The fever of restlessness" is a common phrase on men's tongues; but though Hester was restless as the sick are restless, it was with the chill ague of suspense. She could not keep still, neither in mind nor body, and the effort of occupation was beyond her strength. The little French clock, too, which Eustace had given her in the early stages of their friendship, had taken to itself a personality as well as a voice as it looked down upon her from the mantelpiece. When it told each hour it spoke to her with the accent of all that was inexorable in time or eternity. It reminded her continually—for it struck the quarters—that time was not the sole force, that, once set in motion, cannot be stayed. She could not bear the sight of its expressionless dial, and she had fled from the fireside at which she had been trying to warm her frozen fingers to escape its voice.

How many times she had gone over the same ground in her conscience, how often assured herself that all responsibility had been taken from her by the fact that Ukyn had no choice but to appear at the trial. It was his own hatred and not her money which would colour his story. She had been his dupe and Sarah's, no more; for his honesty alone would not be strong enough to make him abide by the transaction she had been fool enough to prepay; and the less so while the ten pounds were in Sarah's possession, independently of all re-

Digitized by Google

sults. No, these results, whatever they might prove to be, could have no relationship to her deed. Why should she suffer? Why torment herself? Why succumb to her weakness, and to all the demons that her solitude and the incessant brooding over one thought had brought on her?

But the sound of a hoof sent her resolutions to the winds. Her face was as white as paper as she ran round the corner of the house to the little gate by the horse-block, and stood trembling beside it. A groom who had been exercising a horse was disappearing with his charge towards the stable, and the blood rushed to her heart again. As she sat down on the block she held her hand to her side, fearing lest she should faint, for her knees were shaking like those of one risen from a long illness. Her glance went up to the windows, half expectant of the curious face of some servant spying on her plight; surely any human eye that saw her panting body must see her hunted soul too! But she dared not give way here, under the traitorous casements of her own house. She forced herself into outward calm and turned her face towards the fir-trees. One of them thrust out a long arm, and from it dangled the remains of the old swing on which Aythan and Eustace had swung as boys. It looked like a gallows. She pressed her handkerchief to her lips to check an impulse to laugh or to scream aloud, and the fear of losing her self-restraint drove her to her feet again.

She went towards the western slope of the garden. There was only one seat there which caught the sun, the one on which Aythan had seen her from over the wall, as she sat with Eustace on the day

Digitized by Google

of their quarrel. The evening of that day was stamped on her mind, and, when she recalled Aythan, he always came back to her as she saw him when she opened the study door between night and morning. She remembered his rough hair, his long boots and breeches dusty with the dust of the roads, his white shirt and tumbled stock. He had struck her, in contrast with Eustace, as the very emblem of brutality. Afterwards she had seen him only thus and always thus. Even while he said good-bye the gentleness of his words and manner as he bade her count on his loyalty had not changed her vision. His figure came back to her now, and with it a waft of hatred which, for a moment, drugged her nerves and put her terrors to flight.

Ah! she and fate together would yet be stronger than he! She marvelled at herself, remembering that, during her husband's life, she had endured his presence as something no worse than uncongenial. And to her own heart, wherein had been generated the moving force that had driven and was driving this man to his fate, the truth was not revealed; for she did not know that that force came to birth when, with all law and technical equity on her side, she had stood between him and the inheritance which might have been his. She had been swept off her feet, and Eustace, to whom she had clung, had gone with her. Like leaves on a stream they had been whirled forward. How long would the flow bear them on, holding them together? It might be that its rush would drag them apart. She did not reason because she did not understand; but she felt, blindly, the shadowing of disaster.

Digitized by Google

As she sat in the blaze of the spring sun, seeking warmth for her shivering body, she wondered what was going on at Hereford. It was still early afternoon, and Eustace had promised to lose no time in bringing his news. Possibly all might be over and he already hastening towards Llangarth. She had never been inside a court of law, nor present at a trial, and her only ideas of such things were gleaned from hearsay. Her imagination, strung to its highest pitch, summoned before her a half fantastic presentment of the scene which was being enacted, perhaps at this moment, twenty miles away. The formalities surrounding the public administration of justice were strange to her, and she did not know how its agents would speak or act, scarcely how they would look. She was not much given to realising things lying outside the beaten track of her own life, nor was she curious. Eustace had not returned to Crishowell since the opening day of the trial, and his letters and messages threw no light on her ignorance; all she knew was that the Green Jiner's evidence was finished, and that unless Eustace was holding back some bombshell of information, her secret was safe. The fear of its revelation in court had never left her since the money had passed into Sarah's earth-begrimed hand from her own.

Where would Barbara be? The gossip rife about her and Aythan had reached Hester too, and she wondered whether the lovers—if lovers they were—would be near enough to each other to exchange any word. Aythan was handcuffed, perhaps, and surrounded by warders. Barbara would need strong nerves to bear that sight. There still lin-

Digitized by Google

gered with Hester a spice of the old resentment which Eustace's admiration of the younger woman had stirred in her, and a thread of what was almost satisfaction was woven through her sense of Barbara's extremity. Even now, though it was weeks since he had mentioned her name or seemed to recollect her existence, she hated to think that Eustace would see her and perhaps speak to her.

She thought of the tension there would be in court when the jurymen had gone out and the space of waiting had set in. She imagined with a shudder the reappearance of these twelve representatives of fate. Her breath came hard, as though she heard the actual sound of the word "guilty." Then would come the dreadful business of the black cap. How would Aythan comport himself as the sentence fell into the silence of the court? Even she could not doubt his composure. And when he left it and the door closed after him, he would have left the world of living men, as surely as though he stood already on the scaffold or lay in his grave within the prison walls. And she had killed him.

No! No! She sprang up, her whole being protesting that it was false. Ukyn had done it—Sarah had done it—he had done it himself by the enmity he had aroused in his dealings with Wern! Or rather, it was Sir Helbert Bucknall's doing, and Aythan's folly in entering his employment. He should have left the country when he left Crishowell.

It struck Hester that she was moving again into full view of the windows and that she was throwing out her hands, holding them before her as though to thrust away some evil thing. If she was

Digitized by Google

to lose her senses, she must, at least, not do so in front of the house. Those accursed windows! She escaped from the garden and went hurrying down the fields towards the village. Where was there rest for the sole of her foot to-day?

The birds were singing lustily from the elms above the hedgerows as she took her way downwards, her mind too much in thrall to choose the direction of her steps. It had never been her habit to go much through Crishowell, and, of late, she had shunned it completely, because the fever had crept down to it at last and many victims had entered the church by the lych-gate. As the disease spread downwards from the opposite hill it had gathered virulence by reason of the lower ground and the increased proximity of the population, and the cases had followed hard upon one another. Her servants were forbidden to set foot in the village, and, for the last week, communication between it and Crishowell House had ceased. It was only as she crossed the foot-bridge over the brook near Benny Bowen's garden that she remembered these things.

She paused where she stood above the running water and leaned upon the rail, unwilling to venture farther into the infected neighbourhood. There was no place in her mind for any anxiety but one, and though she had enough wisdom not to approach the stricken houses beyond her, she saw them with no apprehensive thrill. In physical matters she was not a nervous woman, and that sense of the coming of the unearthly—as of black wings across the sky—which lies on imaginative spirits at the vision of pestilence, did not touch

Digitized by Google

her. But she looked up from the sailing ripples with startled eyes as Mad Moll emerged from the path leading to Benny's dwelling and stopped by the ford below her feet.

The feeling which the sight of Moll never failed to rouse in her was so strong that it struck her like a blow, paralysing her for a moment and rooting her feet to the plank on which she stood. Eustace had once called the crazy creature his "familiar," but her presence seemed to Hester more significant to herself than to her betrothed.

Superstition can lay its crooked finger upon many differing temperaments and it had not passed her by. It was to her, now, as though all the terrors that had haunted her since she rose were finding their culmination in the appearance of this woman. She had seen her first when she returned from Tillestone with Eustace, her heart aching with a new misgiving, the jealous fear of Barbara's youth and beauty, and sore from her lover's gibing tongue. At her first meeting with Sarah Ukyn—that unrecognised turning-point in her destiny—she had been present, too. And now, on this day of martyrdom, she had returned once more. She asked herself, what subtle emanation from her own agony had summoned this human bird of ill-omen?

She drew herself up, as though to bar Moll's passage over the bridge and to keep her from invading it while she stood in the way. The plank was so narrow that two people could not pass upon it without close contact, and she was dismayed by the idea of touching her. So much did her expression convey the truth that Moll strode into the water.

Digitized by Google

Everything in the world had conspired to keep Moll humble, and, though she could have tossed Hester, like a child, over the rail, she dared not claim an inch of the plank on which the—to her—transcendent being stood. She had heard, in common with her neighbours, of the impending marriage, and her comprehension of it put the last touch to her reverence. Eustace's wife, in poor Moll's estimation, could not fail to stand for all that womanhood might hold of fortune and splendour. She stopped almost knee-deep in the purling Digedi and gazed up at the figure on the bridge.

"You be Mr. Waring's lady; you be married," she said at last, standing as unconcernedly in the flow as if she were some inanimate stake driven into the rush of the flood.

"I soon shall be," replied Hester, kept from escape by a kind of petrifying fascination.

The other remained where she was, contemplating her companion. Then with fitful inconsequence she pointed towards the village roofs.

"They be dyin' there," she said.

"I know, I know," rejoined Hester, beginning to retrace her steps along the bridge. "I am going home."

"But I'll see you again," said the other. She turned as though to follow.

"No!" cried Hester, as she quickened her pace. "I am leaving Crishowell. I shall not come back for a long time. Go away; I have no time to stay talking here!"

She began to search desperately in her pocket for a coin to throw to Moll, who had come to the nearer side of the crossing and watched her, the drops

Digitized by Google

pouring from her skirts. But her pocket was empty and she felt a pang of heathen dismay, akin to that of the savage who has not wherewithal to propitiate the dark ruler of his grove. She crossed the lane and in another minute was through the little swing gate and ascending the field path to Crishowell House.

Once she looked back. Moll had waded into the water again and stood gazing after her, as though rooted in the middle of its flow.

"I 'll see you again, for sure!" she called.

Hester did not stop till she had put the steepest part of the slope between them, and she peeped anxiously through the boughs of a hedge to assure herself that her tormentor was not following. She was so much out of breath from the unwonted climb that she sank down to rest on the grass, throwing back her heavy cloak. Her forehead was damp. The nearness of the house had become a comfort, and even the pitiless blank face of the clock which had upset her nerve before she came out would be preferable to Moll's sinister presence and wild eyes. Indoors, she was, at any rate, safe from the chance of such another encounter.

Now that the excitement of the meeting was dying down her thoughts flew again to Hereford and the issues this day was to bring. In a few hours now, perhaps sooner, she would know what lay before herself and Eustace. She pulled herself, mentally, together with all her force. Should there be anything in his account of the trial to convince her, definitely and finally, that the Green Jiner's evidence must have stood without motive

Digitized by Google

or support, she believed that her own power of will might be able to thrust the memory of this time under her feet, and to trample it down. Once let the ghastly business be played out and its culminating act accomplished, and she and he would yet emerge from the ordeal unscathed. Could she but know that the stain on her had been an imaginary one—in practice, if not in intent—she might look him in the face, as of old, without fear; for there would be nothing vital to confess even should the craving for confession grow on her. So she reasoned. In time she would learn to forget this spring and to look round her with quiet eyes on the possessions that were her own. She would hand them on to those who would come after her, born of her love and Eustace's, in security. Yes, in spite of the mist of horror in which she stood, perchance there was light beyond.

In the centre of the cyclone-belt there is calm; and in the midst of the fiercest tempest of spiritual stress many have known a spell of such peace and exaltation as can only exist in the heroic atmosphere found at the heart of agony. But the temporary lull that came to Hester now was mere physical reaction, and the opiate of her monotonous casuistry. Yet it stayed her up in some small degree. As she made her way homewards her one prayer was that Aythan might be truly guilty, and proved so before the world. Thus only could she obtain rest from the spectres, real and imaginary, of her conscience. Morally, she could never know the truth, unless the sound of death's coming tread should make him confess the deed of which he was accused; but its outward semblance might buy

Digitized by Google

her tranquillity to carry her through the future. The price of that tranquillity was a frightful question; but, inasmuch as it would be exacted by the law and not by herself, she could contemplate the payment.

She did not leave the house again and the dusk fell on her suspense, for there was no sign of Eustace. She was never a great reader, and, had she been so, her attention could not have settled on a book for five minutes. The hour which saw the household to bed passed and she rang the bell, dismissing the servants and telling them to leave the front door unlocked; a groom was to wait up in the stable to take Eustace's mare. She established herself in the study with a lamp beside her and some needlework in her lap, stitching mechanically, on and on, in the profund stillness of the house. She had grown less restless, though her head ached from weariness, and her eyes from concentration on her needle. As no message had reached her during the day she was certain of Eustace's return, and she had no thought of retiring even when midnight struck. At last she put away her work and leaned back in her chair.

It seemed to her that she had only lost consciousness for a few seconds, when she sprang up. The room was cold and the fire out. Eustace was standing before her. She had not heard the sound of his horse's feet, nor the bolts of the door being shot home.

She searched his pale face in silence. Her lips were too dry to frame their question.

"It is over," said Eustace—"guilty."

Digitized by Google

An access of trembling came on her. Her teeth chattered as though she stood in the snow.

"You have sat up too late," said he; "you should have gone to bed."

But she saw, as he spoke, that his attention was not with her.

"It is over," he went on. "Thank God, at least, for that!"

"Where are you going," she cried, finding her voice as he turned away.

"I am worn out," said he.

"But Eustace—Eustace——!"

She sprang upon him and he could feel her nails on his arm through the thick sleeve.

"You must tell me!" she cried.

"God! what is there to tell you? What is it that you want to hear?"

He shook her off and sat down at the table, hiding his face in his hands. "It has been a day of hell, Hester," he went on more gently. "Whatever we may have thought of him, whatever we may have done, God forgive me—and you, too."

"*But what have I done?*" She cried out, her face ghastly.

"There is no use in going back," said he, wearily; "but, if he had not left here, it would be different now. Hester . . . he never said one word . . . he never turned colour. . . ."

His voice failed.

The relief brought her by the first part of his sentence was so great that she scarcely noticed the last. For a moment she had suspected some accidental train of knowledge, some horror of revela-

Digitized by Google

tion wrung from the Green Jiner. But she was reassured.

"And was it Ukyn's evidence that condemned him?" she asked, after a pause.

"That, and in the fact that his hat and stick were found rolled and battered in the barley. Miss Troup had seen him leave them in the church—they were there together that night. She swore it."

"She swore that?" cried Hester. "*Heavens!* How she must love him to wreck her character like that!"

"He had not been in bed all night," continued Eustace, without heeding her.

"And did she swear that too?" asked Hester, with a smile that curled her lip.

"No; that was the servant at Rood Farm. Nothing could shake Ukyn," he went on, "he was absolutely certain of Aythan's face by the shine of the lantern. The marks on his neck, too, were the marks of a strong, broad hand, like his. Do you remember the night he stood here, Hester, the night we quarrelled?"

"I am not likely to forget it," said she, her eyes gleaming suddenly.

"Would to heaven that had never happened," he sighed, turning his head from her.

She came and stood by him, stooping towards him, with her hands leaning on the table.

"He was never like you, Eustace, never!" she burst out; "he cared for no one—no one but Matthew. He was brutal—he has brought this on himself! He has brought nothing but trouble to anybody; and now who knows but he has ruined

Digitized by Google

Barbara Troup, too! He has disgraced us! No good has ever come with him—I tell you, none!"

Her words rushed out as though she was possessed. Eustace rose and turned, looking at her dumbly. But she could not check herself.

"We will forget it all in time, Eustace! What have we had to do with it? We cannot stop justice. You saw him yourself almost killing that wretched man that day by the brook—he would have made you help him if he could! You said so yourself; you told me——"

"Hush, Hester," said he. "Go up-stairs. Let me go, for God's sake. Let me get away."

"You do not believe he is guilty!" she cried aloud. "I see it! I know it! Tell me if you believe it!"

"What do I know more than any one else knows?" he exclaimed. "I can only think of him as I saw him to-day; only of his courage, only of him long ago—long before you came!"

For a moment his face changed as their eyes met. Then he went from the room without a word.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXVII

AGAINST HOPE

Hester lost no time in leaving Crishowell. It was clear to her that Eustace suspected nothing of the true reason of her distress; and though, now that the suspense of waiting for the verdict was over, she was deafening her ears to the inward voices, she was no happier.

She could not accuse him of avoiding her, and, while she told herself that the impression made on him by Aythan's trial and sentence was the cause of the change she saw, she got no comfort from the assurance. She dared not admit that, since his return from Hereford, their relations had not been the same. She had sometimes felt a growing difference, but, to the difference she knew now, it was as the shower to the flood, as the candle to the sun. The eyes with which he looked at her held a shadow that she could not meet; and a chill phantom sat between them, walked between them, was at their board, in their path. Though neither would acknowledge the presence of the guest openly, each knew that the other was aware of it. They made no allusions and spoke of no rupture; but Hester felt that they must part temporarily lest they should part eternally.

Digitized by Google

Life was a little easier to Eustace when she was gone. He could face the position better alone with his thoughts and free from the constraint of her presence. The woman who would be his wife in a few weeks was become abhorrent to him. On the night of the trial, when he had come back sick to the core of his soul, her outburst of speech had shown him dark places that, in his worst moments of misgiving, he had not suspected. He knew that, even now, she had not one spark of real feeling for Aythan; and he judged that, while the horror of the appalling situation had touched some coward spot in her nature, she had no true pity and no more sorrow for him than if he had been some stranger of whose impending fate she had heard casually. He recoiled from her.

The breach she had cleft between the young men had been joined again in the court-house, and Eustace had gone back once more to the days of boyhood. Old games, old fights, old scrapes, old joys had come thick upon his memory when he looked on his cousin's face as he left the court, a condemned man. Shallow though Eustace was and treacherous as he could be, he had none of Hester's remorseless coldness. There was a hateful strength about her that he loathed and feared, and against which instinct had tried to warn him, time and again. But he had been too indolent to listen, too weak to act, and self-interest had deluded him. He had spent what force he had in boldness of speech and whimsical jugglings with life. A man's character will not change much in a week nor in a month; but though the Eustace of to-day was, fundamentally, the Eustace of yester-

Digitized by Google

day, he had received a shock which stirred his light mind and selfish spirit to their uttermost depths. Were Aythan to come back to him, free, he might be no more to him than in the recent years; but, for the time being, his heart bled for his old comrade and his quick imagination quivered with agony at the thought of what was to come. Even his vanity was in abeyance, for he had forgiven Barbara her treatment of it and the two had spoken in court as though neither remembered what had passed. His discovery that Hester could see Aythan only as an obstacle, had given the meagre remnant of his affection its death-blow; and, living in the old house, alone with his trouble, he began to ask his heart whether he had the courage to escape from her. But, as usual, he temporised, though there were moments in which he all but decided to leave the country without a word or sign.

It was known in Hereford that, while the judge was compelled by the verdict of the jury to pass sentence of death, he had risen not altogether satisfied on certain points; and when the trial was over there were many who declared that his feeling for the prisoner had been visible from the beginning. In their opinion the official impartiality which he was supposed to put on with his robes had scarcely hidden his sympathies. When it was announced next day that, on the application of the prisoner's counsel, he had stayed the execution for three weeks, the news sent a thrill through the little world whose interest centred in Aythan, for at that date sentences were carried out so much more quickly than they are now that the delay was unusual.

Digitized by Google

Some said that it was neither the prisoner nor his youth, nor his bearing, nor even anything in the evidence that had influenced the judge, and that the reason for his action might have been guessed as he watched Barbara in the witness-box; for he had the reputation of being susceptible. As she gave her evidence and described how she had been alone in the dark church with the young man a smile ran round the court; but the counsel for the Crown had to be content with a few searching questions, for it was plain that a severe cross-examination would please neither the judge nor the jury.

Aythan had been told by the chaplain to hope nothing from the delay. There was no talk of a reprieve and no reason for supposing that there was any prospect of one. The chaplain advised him to put all thought of the matter from him and to fix his mind on the great change which was to come so soon. Very little but civility passed between them.

But though the delay raised no expectations in those who were best informed, Sir Helbert Bucknall was determined to take what advantage he could from it, and to employ the time in moving heaven and earth for the commutation of the sentence. Heaven and earth being, in such an affair, synonymous with the King, he was preparing an attempt to move him through the Secretary of State. He counted a good many important people and one cabinet minister among his relations, and though he had, hitherto, neither troubled nor conciliated his family, he meant to make up for it now. His daily visit to Barbara since she took

Digitized by Google

sanctuary with Mrs. Stotson had been as much a matter of course as his breakfast. She was now awaiting permission for a last interview with Aythan. If he was to die, he should do so in absolute certainty of her love; if he was to live—and Barbara clung desperately to the frail hope of Sir Helbert's success—he should go to whatever term of servitude was decreed, assured of her constancy.

"If it is fifty years, and I am alive," she told Sir Helbert, "he will find me waiting."

"You must not build on it, my dear," he had replied; "the chance is too small."

His acquaintances said he had grown, if possible, more unpleasant of late, and, in a manner, they were right. They did not see him when he was with Barbara, and while he lavished a wry tenderness upon her, he afterwards balanced these expenses of the heart in his dealings with other people.

He drove up to Mr. Stotson's door one day in his claret-coloured carriage, his face set grimly, for he was about to perform an act of courage beside which he felt the leading of a forlorn hope would be nothing. He was going to take Barbara to say good-bye to Aythan. There was more than a fortnight of life left to the young man, but he had asked that the interview which he both hungered for and dreaded should take place soon.

Sir Helbert was met by Harry Stotson who was to go with them to the prison and represent his father in some legal formalities connected with the written order he carried. Barbara awaited her friend in a little room which Mrs. Stotson, who was the soul of kindness, had set apart for her.

Digitized by Google

"Young Stotson is ready," said the old man, as he entered. "I think we had better go at once."

She rose obediently. There was scarcely anything, now, that she could not say to Sir Helbert, but she had come to an hour in which silence alone could keep her steady.

Harry Stotson stood waiting in the hall. He and Barbara looked each other in the face as though each feared, by the avoidance of the other's eye, to make some terrible admission.

The girl sat bolt upright as they drove through the streets, her face turned to the carriage window. There was not a tear in her eyes. After they arrived at the prison and were shown into the governor's private room she sat down on the chair which Harry Stotson had drawn forward for her, still looking towards the light. When he was summoned by an official and she was left alone with Sir Helbert, she turned to him.

"Shall I take him any message?" she asked.

But at this moment the governor of the prison came in. She rose and stood up, white as a sheet. He was a humane man, and, without introduction or ceremony, he asked her if she was ready.

"Quite ready, sir," said she.

Sir Helbert went to her side. "Shall I go with you as far as the—place?" he asked.

Her words were perfectly distinct, though, for the moment, her voice almost forsook her. There was no ring in it as it cut the intense stillness that reigned over everything in the prison.

"No, thank you. I can go alone. Have you no message, Sir Helbert?"

Digitized by Google

"Tell him I know they are all damned liars together!" burst out the old man.

Barbara followed the governor down the long stone passages like a woman in a trance. The ill-lit place and the iron gratings on either side might have made her shudder at another time, but she took no heed of them, only seeing at the end of the narrow flagged way before them an open door beside which a warder stood, stiff and upright, with the keys in his hand as the governor approached. As both men stepped aside to let her pass in she had a moment of faintness. Then the bolts rattled behind and she was in Aythan's arms.

She had gone over all she would say to him many times in the last few days; she might have to live through a long life on the recollection of this meagre half-hour. The words she spoke would be irretrievable; not to be modified for anything that she could say or do through all the pain that would be stored in the times to come; and her fervent hope had been to give him courage—more courage. She knew he had plenty, but she longed to take the whole passion of her soul and build with it a bridge over which he might tread across that dark stream before him. If she could have plucked out her heart and shredded it into bits wherewith to pave his way to the dim world into which his youth and strength were to pass so soon, she would have done it. And she could only cling to him, dumb and trembling, with her lips against his cheek. She had borne herself, tearless, above all pity's intrusions, apart from all but the support of Sir Helbert's rough comradeship and the price-

Digitized by Google

less sympathy of silence; but her failure to do anything for Aythan but hold to him lest she should fall broke her fortitude. If she had only known it, no word she could say when her strength came back was so much to him as the helpless clasp of her arms. It was the recollection of that which stayed with him afterwards.

As she sobbed he drew her towards the prison bed in the corner and they sat down side by side. She quieted herself with a determined effort.

Then the living man rose in Aythan and thrust the condemned one aside.

"Darling," said he, "do you know that you have not told me yet if you love me, and I am longing to hear it?"

She put her arms about him again.

"Aythan, if Sir Helbert succeeds, if you ever come back—if it is fifty years—and I am alive, I shall wait."

"We must not think of that," he said quietly.

"But I will!" she cried. "Not till the last day shall I believe it is over. And it will not be over, Aythan, never, while I live."

For answer he held her as though he would never let her go, kissing her again and again.

"It is something to have this," he said. "Many a man whose life is treble as long as mine will be, has had to do with less."

"Does it help you, Aythan? Does it make it less hard? Oh, tell me that, and it will be something to think of always."

"It is everything to me," he said, "everything."

There was a sound outside which made Barbara raise her head and look towards the door. The

Digitized by Google

step passed on and grew fainter, but it reminded her that she must give her message.

"Oh, Aythan, they will soon be coming for me," she said. "Sir Helbert told me to tell you that he knows they are all damned liars together, and Mrs. Stotson sent you her love. I shall never forget what the Stotsons have done for me, and Sir Helbert."

He turned away his head.

"You must tell them," he said, "tell them from me——"

"I know," said Barbara.

"They have let me see Harry Stotson," he went on again after a minute, "and I have heard all about you and Sir Helbert. Tell him that one of the things I regret most is having to leave his service. Tell him that I'm sorry for anything I ever did or said that annoyed him—we did not always get on well, you know. But he will be a good friend to you, my dear. And Harry Stotson, too, if I don't see him again. Barbara, do you know that he offered to stick to me to the end—the very end? But I could n't accept that. And he is going to take my little dog. I would have left her with you if I did not know Mr. Troup will not have a dog in the house. She would be wretched, Barbara, shut up continually in kennels. Everything else I possess is to be yours, my watch and my books, and the cob and everything; and there is a little double bridle, too, that will just fit your pony. I should like to think of you using it."

Her arms tightened and they sat for a little while without speaking.

"Barbara, don't forget what I am going to say

Digitized by Google

to you," said he at last. "God knows I don't expect to live in spite of all Sir Helbert is doing; but whether I live or die you shall not bind yourself. My dear, if such a miracle should happen and we ever meet again I shall be an old man with nothing but the dregs of a discharged convict's life before me. Don't make it harder for me," he went on as she tried to stop him; "you may promise what you like now, but you *shall* remember, if a time comes when you may fancy I stand between you and some other man, that I told you you were free. Do you think it is easy to say, darling? Do you understand me, Barbara? Do you understand that I mean what I am saying?"

She had covered her face with her hands, but he drew them down.

"I have hurt you," he said, "but I can't help that. It is over now and you will remember it, if need be."

"Oh!" she cried; "and all this has come upon us for what you have never done! Where is God, Aythan? Where is God?"

"You *know* I am innocent, Barbara? I have even forgotten to ask you that."

"There is no need to ask," she replied. "But if you were guilty, I should have come to you."

They talked a little longer, but, as their time ran short, there were pauses between their words in which both were listening for the step they dreaded. When it came, and the warder's voice outside told Barbara she must take her leave, they stood up facing each other and then clung together for a speechless minute.

"God bless you—my dear love—my dear love,"

Digitized by Google

he whispered, as they held each other close. She looked into his face as though she would stamp it into her memory, as though she could compel her eyes to hold its image, taken from this, their first meeting as avowed lovers and their last, through the barren years coming. Then he pushed her from him and the door opened.

"I shall hope, Aythan; I shall hope," said Barbara, looking back again from the threshold.

When she had gone he went to the bed in the corner and knelt down by it, his arms stretched out before him over the blanket.

Barbara rejoined Sir Helbert and Harry Stotson in the governor's room. She held the old man's arm as they went to the carriage. "Let me go home by myself," she whispered to him; and when he had put her in, he and his companion walked away together. They went back to Mrs. Stotson's house, for, though each knew he could do nothing to help her, each felt he could not but stay at hand.

"I am taking her home to-morrow," said Sir Helbert, "and then I shall go on to Llangarth. I must spend one day there before I am off to do what I can in London."

"How I wish there was any way in which our firm could be of service!" said Harry. "There is nothing in the world we would not do, my father and I."

"Egad, Stotson; but you have stood by us," said Sir Helbert.

They had come to the lawyer's house and were on the steps, waiting to be admitted. The young man stood looking down the quiet court which

Digitized by Google

surrounded the offices, his sharp profile averted from Sir Helbert. He turned to him suddenly.

"He was the finest fellow I ever knew," he said.

And then, because he had used the past tense, he broke down.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXVIII

SIR HELBERT IS RECKLESS

"I HOPE you have not thought me ungrateful for all you have done," said Mr. Troup in an unconvincing voice.

"I have n't had time to think of you at all, sir," replied the other. "I have been too much occupied in thinking of Miss Troup."

Clarence's eyes drooped languidly. But there was a faint flush under his skin.

"Ah! you are interested in this business, I suppose?"

"Most people are," rejoined Sir Helbert; "at least, those who have any decency of feeling in them. There has been a damnable miscarriage of justice, sir. Of that I am convinced.

"Indeed?" said Mr. Troup.

Sir Helbert had only once seen his companion in Hereford, and the prejudice against him had been deepened by the meeting. Now, he found him almost unendurable.

"I am, sir—absolutely convinced!" he continued, bringing his palm down decisively on the dainty toy of a table which stood by Clarence's elbow. "The judge himself is said to be dissatisfied on some points."

Digitized by Google

As Sir Helbert had the habit of biting his nails the sight of his hand added in no way to Mr. Troup's pleasure. He drew back irritably in his seat. He wished that Barbara would come in, if only to make a diversion; but Barbara, after bidding Sir Helbert bood-bye, had gone to her own room, purposely leaving the two men together. She did not feel able to answer questions, and she hoped, if her father had any to ask, that he would ask them of her friend.

Sir Helbert was not so blind as to be unaware that Mr. Troup had good cause of complaint in the contemptuous assertiveness of his manner. Though Barbara had not been forbidden to stay in Hereford after her father had left the town, she had virtually gone against him by doing so, and his own part in helping her had been a tacit defiance. But he gloried in the thought and was anxious that Clarence should know his sentiment. He did not suspect that his companion thought much more lightly of that action than of the one he was committing now. The table on which his hand lay was a valuable one, and he wore a signet ring in a sharp claw setting. Clarence Troup's eyes were fixed on it. He was as ready to defend his sensibilities or his furniture as a mother is to defend her children, and Sir Helbert had assaulted both.

He sprang up with the fretful quickness of a timid creature brought to bay.

"I really must ask you to leave me, Sir Helbert," he said. "I have heard so much of this affair that I am weary of it. I am very busy, and I am not feeling well."

The complete self-concern of his expression

Digitized by Google

roused the old man's protective feelings for Barbara yet more strongly. What a companion for her in her sore trouble!

"I will wish you a good-day, sir!" he exclaimed. "I fear your daughter won't receive much sympathy from you. I have brought her back, but I heartily wish I could take her away with me."

"I wish you could," returned Mr. Troup. "She might do you more credit than she has done me by publicly coupling our name with that of a criminal."

Sir Helbert's mouth twitched, and the blood rose to his face. He could bear no more.

"You are a coward, sir!" he roared; "that's what you are, a snivelling fellow! And I don't care whether I say it in your house or out of it! You may talk of your name, but you have played such a beggarly part in this business that your name is a by-word in Hereford and in the neighbourhood, sir—a *by-word!*"

Mr. Troup's countenance was a mask of impotent horror. He darted towards the bell.

"You need not ring, sir!" continued Sir Helbert, in the same shout; "I have no wish for a moment more of your company!"

And having, with the best intentions, made Barbara's position at home almost untenable, he went out of the house like a typhoon.

He drove towards Llangarth, his head sunk between his shoulders, and, as his temper settled, he regretted his ebullition and realised how little he had helped matters by it; for he could not suppose that he would ever be admitted inside the doors of Tillestone again. Here was but another lost

Digitized by Google

opportunity. He had not appreciated Aythan until too late, and from Barbara, who seemed to have stepped into his empty place, he had now cut himself off by his violence.

He wrote her a long letter before he went to bed that night. He was thankful that the morrow would bring him occupation, for he had been living so much more in touch with others in the last couple of weeks that his loneliness was dreadful. To-morrow he was going to do a duty which, a few weeks ago, he would have contemplated in a very different spirit. He looked back on his last encounter with Aythan. It had been an encounter, indeed, for the two had differed strongly on the point he was now going to examine for himself. And Aythan had won in the end.

He remembered his impatience with his agent's plain speaking and his sense of his own folly in having employed a gentleman, instead of a working man; they were so cursedly independent, and this one was the worst he had ever seen. Aythan had insisted that the cottage in which Ned Prosser and another farm servant were lying stricken by typhus was not fit for human beings to inhabit. Sir Helbert had built the house himself many years before, and, though he had never been inside it, he had told the young man that he was talking nonsense. Had he not put in a new door only a year ago? But Aythan had maintained that its roof leaked, that its windows would not open, and that its site was in a swampy field in which the foul drainage of the farm beast-houses found its outlet.

And finally Sir Helbert had promised to look at

Digitized by Google

the house, but he had only done so because he feared that Aythan might throw up his place if he refused, and he was aware that he could never get so good a man again for the same money. At least, that was how he explained his compliance to himself; for he had not cared to acknowledge, even to his secret heart, how much he liked him and his tenacity.

And now, his errand was one that he would do anything rather than omit. As for the fever, into the midst of which he was going, it did not concern him an atom. It would not have done so at any time.

He rode his nag, hired from the Llangarth inn, towards the farms which he had not seen, except in the distance, for years. He had never cared for that outlying bit of his property. It had been inherited separately from the rest of his belongings, and his whole attention had been given to the breeding of Herefordshire cattle on the Herefordshire estate. The mountain which Aythan loved was an abomination to him, and so was the semi-Welsh community that it sheltered. The latter was thriftless, profitless, and to him unsympathetic; quite an unfit object on which to spend money.

He had no servant with him, and, most of those whom he had turned out of Wern being scattered broadcast over the country, he was not always recognised by his tenants. There were so many gates in his way that he bribed a little boy, who had been watching him stolidly from an eminence, to run beside him and open them; and with unwonted generosity he promised him a shilling if he

Digitized by Google

would hold his horse while he settled his business.

He was jogging across a small field pervaded by the malodorous breath of a stagnant patch of water that lay near the dwelling they approached, when the boy stopped short.

"Go on, boy; get on, can't you?" cried his patron testily.

"I can't go nigher, indeed," said the guide.

"And why not, you young devil, eh?"

"Mother 'll hide me if I do go nigher nor here. Her said her would."

"Well, but if you don't, I will," said Sir Helbert, shaking his crop.

The boy burst into such loud cries of alarm that the old man feared he might draw on them the notice of the farm at the top of the field.

"Be quiet, you little fool!" he shouted. "Stop that noise immediately, I won't touch you."

The roars ceased at the less threatening position of the crop.

"And why can't you go on?" inquired Sir Helbert, staring grimly down from his saddle.

"It 's the fever," blubbered the boy. "Johnny Price's father was dyin' there. He be dead now and buried, but Prosser 's there."

"Damn the fever. Is Prosser alive?"

"Yes, sure. He be better, too."

"Here, take the horse," said Sir Helbert, dismounting; "and mind you don't stir till I come back or you won't get a farthing."

He went up to the cottage door and rapped upon it. It was ajar and through it he could see into a room in which a man sat propped in a chair by the fireside. An unmade bed with its coverings

Digitized by Google

trailing upon the floor and the broken remains of food on the table completed a picture of undignified discomfort which he had time to take in before an uncompromising-looking woman answered his knock. If she was the new-made widow of Johnny Price's father she showed no signs of bereavement, examining the visitor with that look of everyday suspicion seen in the faces of those whose lives are a perpetual single combat waged with small practical necessities.

"The fever 's here," she remarked, blocking the open space with her person.

"Does a man called Edward Prosser live in this house?" demanded Sir Helbert, whose memory of the place was not perfectly certain.

"There he be," said she, nodding her head backwards, and eyeing him more curiously than ever.

"Come, let me in," said he.

"You bean't afeared?"

"Stuff and nonsense, woman. Let me in, I tell you. I am the landlord, and I want to look round the house."

Ned Prosser moved feebly as the stranger entered. His fleshy face had grown long and bony, and as he was by nature a high-coloured man, he now looked like a cumbersome ghost of himself. The atmosphere of the room was close, for, as Aythan had said, the windows did not open and the draughts that blew down from an ill-mended roof had caused those who lived under it to stuff up every crevice by which air could penetrate. The dead Price had shared the cottage with the sick man, and his wife had cooked for both; she stood

Digitized by Google

by, listening, as Sir Helbert explained his errand.

The bare fact of Aythan's trial and sentence had only reached Prosser in the last couple of days. The cottage, shunned by the neighbours, had been visited by no one but an overworked doctor, who would have had little time for discussing the news with his patients, even had they been fit to talk; and Ned's excitement on hearing of the events that had happened during his illness had been so intense that the widow was alarmed. She had nursed both him and her dead husband, and she was in mortal fear of a relapse for the patient, for she was almost worn out, and repented bitterly of having mentioned a word to him of what she had heard. Each day she had gone down to the hedge that bordered on the lane to get the provisions left for her at a safe distance from the infected cottage; and it was in a conversation shouted across this barrier with a neighbour that she had learnt what was going on in the outer world.

Ned watched his landlord as he went round the room examining the walls and windows, and asking his abrupt questions. He felt almost sick as his gaze followed the terrible Sir Helbert, of whom he lacked courage to inquire anything on the subject that was haunting him, and which, nightly, came between him and his fitful rest.

"Sir," he broke out at last, "be they to hang Mr. Waring?"

Sir Helbert turned round with a start. The man's hands trembled and he looked as if he was going to faint.

"Seems as if he was mad about it," chimed in the woman. "'T is nowt to do wi' we. Can't

Digitized by Google

hear nothin' here, we can't, so I do tell him to put it out o' his mind. I 've tuk him off his death-bed once, an' I can't do it twice."

"Tell me what they be goin' to do to Mr. Waring, sir," said Ned again, clasping his hands. Sweat was starting on his forehead and above his dry lips.

"If you 'd tell 'im about it, maybe he 'd keep quiet," said the woman loudly. "I might get some peace then."

Sir Helbert sat down; it appeared that nothing but the whole history from the beginning would satisfy Ned.

Prosser's eyes never wandered from the speaker as he went into the detailed history of Aythan's arrest. It seemed almost to affect him with terror. Two or three times he made as if he would rise from his chair, but weakness checked him like a rope on a hobbled animal's foot. The widow had left the room, and when she returned, on hearing Sir Helbert get up, he leaned back too much exhausted to speak.

There was a touch of pity in the old man's face as he went out.

"This is a worse doghole than I thought," said he; "you shall have better quarters, man, when I have time to attend to it."

Certainly this house of his was bad enough to surprise him. The situation would have irritated him a good deal had it not been tempered by the one subject to which the question brought him back and on which everything in his mind now turned; but the thought of the amount of misery that might have been spared, had he given heed to Aythan,

Digitized by Google

struck him and hurt him, too. Even now it was hardly his starved sense of justice which made him purpose a new order of things; it was the anticipated attachment to Aythan's memory. He sighed wearily as he tramped across the muddy grass to the place where his horse stood. Everything was proving too much for him: too much for his self-love, too much for his peace, too much for the stability of that wall which, all the long years of his life, had divided him for his kind. So little do we know ourselves that he would have denied with profanity the indisputable truth that he had always had much in common with Mr. Troup. But he was developing the capacity for suffering, and his new-found power was carrying him surely forward, far beyond the spot where Clarence sat at ease in the pitiful sanctuary of his taste.

He looked round to hear the widow-woman calling behind him, and stopped. She was begging him to come back to the house, and, to his astonishment, he saw the gaunt figure of Prosser in the doorway. He had not supposed him capable of moving.

"He were cryin' out after you so soon as you were gone," said she. "Come you back, sir; he do seem that bad."

Ned Prosser had reached the chair again by the time Sir Helbert entered and sat with closed eyes, overcome by his exertions. It was a few minutes before he could speak.

"He did n't do it, not him," said he when Sir Helbert sat down.

"Who? Mr. Waring? I know that very well. Did you bring me back to tell me that?"

Digitized by Google

"I do know," said Prosser, trembling in every limb. "And I'll tell you *how* I do know. You won't be hard on me nor give me up to the police? I can't let him hang for want of a word, an' yet I durs n't speak!"

Tears of excitement and weakness were beginning to roll down his face.

"But you'll give me a chance, Sir Helbert, sure—ly," he implored, catching his breath. "He was a fine chap, Waring, he were, and main good to me, an' I can't let 'em do for him."

The truculence that lay so near Sir Helbert's skin might have burst out into threats a short time ago; but the different relationship into which he had been driven with anxiety and sorrow and fear, and their closeness to his own heart, had taught him something. He was leaving Mr. Troup further and further behind.

"My good fellow," he said with an effort, "if you'll speak out and tell me one syllable that can help to save him, I'll make you bless the day you were born."

"But the malting, Sir Helbert! They'll put me in gaol for it."

"It's a matter of fines, man; Milman is in gaol because he can't pay them. If any information you give to help Mr. Waring should bring a fine on you, I'll pay it myself. Trust me for that."

But the sick man's relief could only show itself in weeping. His body shook as he hid his face in the dirty cotton handkerchief that he clutched in his hand. The widow came in, hearing his sobs.

"Here!" cried Sir Helbert dismayed. "Bring water, or brandy, or anything! Be quick about it!"

Digitized by Google

"Brandy?" she exclaimed with sordid irony. "Much of that there be here. Will you take a drop o' sage tea?" she cried, clapping Prosser on the back and raising her voice as though he were deaf.

He shook his head and wept on.

"Let him be," said Sir Helbert, waving her away. Prosser raised his face at last.

"Milman an' me were cousins," he began; "leastways his wife and me were; and he offered me a bit to help him wi' the malting. I did n't do much, sir—just now and again when he were a hand short. He said he could trust me, ye see, bein' a relation. Well, I did feel that bad 'afore the fever tuk me that I could n't do nothin', and the day the excisemen got into Rood church I could n't work. I was that mazed all day an' my head that heavy I just sat at the table here till evenin'. Supper-time it were no better. Could n't eat a bite, not I, and could n't lie down quiet in my bed."

Sir Helbert's mouth twitched impatiently, but he was too much afraid of upsetting Prosser again to hurry him.

"It was like as if I could n't abide the house, so out I went, just wanderin' on, and I got half way to Rood church, an' me not so much as thinkin' what I were doin'. Moon were gettin' down a bit but I could see well enough. Indeed, I did fancy the air up by the hill was doin' me good."

"Did you go to Rood church?" interrupted Sir Helbert.

"Not I. I were too much afeard if Milman were at the malt an' saw me, I 'd have to work too. I went wide o' the church an' past the farm. That

Digitized by Google

tired I were too; I sat down behind one of they bushy banks, for I were feelin' bad again, like as I could n't move. Well, I had n't been there long afore I seed Mr. Waring comin' up the grass from the way o' the mountain."

"Are you *sure* it was him? Are you certain?" cried Sir Helbert.

"No doubt o' that," continued Ned. "I were n't sure at first because the dog were n't there, but he come an' stood still close by me, t'other side of the bank. I could see his face plain. His head were bare an' him standin' no further from me nor you be. Like a man wi' his mind full o' some wild talk he was, and he stretched out his arms an' looked out over the hill facin' the road from Tillestone. I did n't move, for it got into my head that he might turn an' go down by the church an' get wind of what was goin' on. Milman told me he were early in his bed o' nights, mostly, but I remembered how he were up early an' late after Ukyn, an' I thought when I see'd him, sure enough he was after some one else now. My heart come into my mouth.

"Well, he did n't go home then. He turned his back on the farm and the church that was no more nor a half-mile away, an' off he went as he might be goin' to Talgarth. I looked at my poor father's watch I 'd got in my pocket an' it were nigh on eleven. 'Milman 'll be finished now,' says I, 'an' all quiet.'"

Sir Helbert had sat like an image, but as Ned paused for breath he got up and stood facing him at the hearth, his chest heaving.

"I sat there till he were out o' sight, Sir Helbert, and then thinks I, Rood church be straight in my

Digitized by Google

way home an' I 'll go down an' warn Milman to keep a look out if he be still at his malt. I could hardly get my feet along, an' just as I come nigh the church door, an' were thinkin' they was all a-bed at the farm, I heard a noise like the devil a-huntin' inside the church. Then the door banged an' I heard a voice callin' out about a knife. My legs was achin' an' my head like to burst, but I started to run, an' one o' they stones under the grass tuk my foot an' down I went. I didn't dare move, sir, not I indeed, bein' so near the door, so I put my head down in the grass. It was long an' thick an' old Mother Davis's gravestone was standin' up between me an' the church, like as her would ha' done herself, poor old soul, if her 'd been there, to know there was a poor man in trouble behind her.

"I had n't been there above a minute or two when the church door opened. I got an eye round the stone an' three o' them came out draggin' a heavy load. 'Rowl the sneakin' rascal under the seat; *he* won't move,' I heard Milman say. An' then they went back into Rood church an' began shovellin' about in the malt as if there were n't no body lyin' for dead in the porch. I could n't make it out, but 't were enough for me. By that time I could crawl, an' no more, but I did my best. I did n't get back till two o'clock—so Mrs. Price did tell me when her let me in—and I just laid down on my bed, an' here I 've been ever since that day an' night——"

"And where did you say you saw the last of Mr. Waring?" broke in Sir Helbert in a strange voice.

"Better nor half-a-mile off. He 'd ha' been a good step o' the way to Talgarth, if he 'd kept the

Digitized by Google

same pace, by the time I was up from behind Mother Davis's stone. He were n't there nor thereabouts when they finished the Green Jiner," added Ned, as the issues that turned upon his story came back to his mind; "an' I could ha' told them that all this time, too."

Sir Helbert Bucknall left the house a few minutes later; and it was said afterwards by the widow-woman, who watched him go, that he ran the whole way to the spot where his horse stood.

Be that as it may, he got into his saddle and rode at a hand-canter to the gate. His attendant boy, who could not keep up with him, reached it panting, and as he swung it back on its hinges saw a coin spin through the air.

"Mother!" he cried, when he got home, "a gentleman promised me a silver shillin' to run alongside him and mind his horse, but he only give me this nasty yellow one!"

* * * * * *

Meanwhile Sir Helbert was pushing his hireling down the steep lanes, regardless of loose stones or ruts, or the unusual angle of his way. He had been reckless with his temper yesterday, reckless with his money to-day, and now he was the same with his neck. It was not too late for him to get to Hereford that night. He would knock up the Stotsons, father and son, were he to reach it at three in the morning. He was in a state of such excitement when he reached Llangarth that the landlord of his inn had some trouble in persuading him to dine before he started. He had arrived the day before with his own horses, so there was no difficulty in getting forward; but, until he could pour out his

Digitized by Google

news in Stotson's office, there was no rest for him.

He had eaten nothing for hours. Though he was exceedingly hungry he sat down under protest and betrayed so much impatience over his meal that a quiet-looking stranger, with whom he shared the table, began to grow rather tired of his company and of the way in which he walked to and from the window.

"The roads are good just now, sir," he hazarded at last. "If you are going to Hereford you will reach it comfortably."

The old man was about to make some reply, when the landlord, coming in with the wine he had ordered, addressed him by name.

The stranger looked up from his dinner. He also was eating hurriedly.

"Forgive me for troubling you," he began when they were alone, "but as I hear that you are Sir Helbert Bucknall I must ask your patience for a moment. Your interest in the family at Crishowell House is so great that you may be willing to do them an incalculable service."

"I have no interest in the family, sir," snapped Sir Helbert; "my interest is solely with Mr. Aythan Waring."

"If you can give me the address of Mrs. Bridges, who is in London, I shall be infinitely obliged," continued the other, without noticing his companion's ill-humour.

"I am not acquainted with the lady, sir; and I don't know it."

The stranger leaned forward.

"It is a matter of life and death," he said. "Or rather, a matter of death only."

Digitized by Google

"Why do you not apply to Crishowell House?" inquired Sir Helbert, his attention arrested in spite of himself; "I believe Mr. Eustace Waring is there."

"He is," said the other with a curious look, "but he cannot help me. He is dying."

"Dying?" exclaimed Sir Helbert.

"Dying, sir. Crishowell village has suffered more than any other place since this hideous scourge of typhus began, and he is the worst case there has been yet. The whole household has fled and there are no servants left. No one will come near the place, and there is no one with him but a crazy woman."

"But are you quite certain of what you say?" asked Sir Helbert.

"I am Doctor Martin, sir, and I left Crishowell House not an hour ago. The villagers are half mad with panic and only this crazy creature stands fast. The poor lady who is engaged to Mr. Waring should be told—sent for, in fact—though if she values her life she will not come. I have tried to get her address at Crishowell vicarage, but the vicar is down himself. How we are to get through this ghastly time, God knows."

Sir Helbert got up. His carriage was coming round to the door.

"The Stotsons in Hereford will have her direction," he said; "I will send her word through them."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIX

EUSTACE'S JOURNEY

WHILE Sir Helbert's carriage drove on with its load of fateful tidings the unseen destroyer was walking abroad in the peaceful-looking country. His steps had entered the house where Eustace strove alone with his thoughts, halting between two opinions and looking fearfully before him into the settled future he had begun to dread. His heart prayed for escape, and the nature whose resolution he had allowed to ebb away in the easy, idle years barred the road. He was shocked and haunted by Aythan's coming fate.

He looked back now, seeing his own life as the life of a stranger—some other man who had missed his way again and again, and upon whom night was falling in an unknowu land. He who had been able to get so much from opportunity, how had he contrived to find himself awakened at last to the knowledge that he had nothing? What he had planned for himself was coming only too surely to his hand, and he knew that the self he had created could not save him from this irony of success. He might look upon everything he saw as his own. Comfort and position would be his, and pleasure when he wanted it. If he did not care much for the soil on which

Digitized by Google

he stood he knew what it represented, and that Hester, no longer tied by mourning or widowhood, would exult in her freedom, for travel and society would be pleasant to her in a world in which she could buy the best of everything. All this would be his too. And beside him, for ever, would be the shadow of a dead man he had once loved and whose death had been needed to show him to what manner of woman he had bound himself. But while he sought for courage to free himself, the liberator was at his door.

He was the first man stricken by the virulent impulse that the fever had taken when it gained foothold in the village. As one after another went down in the cottages clustering on the brook, and new victims daily followed the old to their resting-places by the church, terror set in on Crishowell. The vicar could no longer perform the well-known service and the sexton's hand ceased on the bell; the dead were carried to their graves by those who had tended them in their passing. It might be said of the little place as it had been said of Egypt, that there was not a house in which there was not one dead.

The servants of Crishowell House fled one by one, and only the groom who had seen Aythan ride away nearly a year ago stayed on. Eustace lay alone raving through the hours and the man went in and out, doing what he could, till one day the tall figure of Mad Moll strode up the hill and took its place by the bed.

Though Moll did not live in the village she came daily for her provisions to its little shop. Nobody knew whether the dread signs of the pestilence on

Digitized by Google

every side conveyed anything to her. She showed no fear and yet looked with a strange repelled wonder at the busy groups frequent in the churchyard. If she understood what they were doing she made no remark. She passed them unmoved if her way lay near them, and though she spoke of death and fever as she had spoken of them to Hester, no one questioned what the words stood for in her mind. Perhaps it needed something personal to drive their meaning home.

She was waiting to be served at the counter as she caught Eustace Waring's name. She did not know that he had come back from Hereford, for she had not seen him of late, though she understood that he had gone to the trial—that event which distracted her neighbours and had so little interest for herself. She knew also that Tom Ukyn was at Hereford and she had a vague idea why, for she had often listened, unnoticed, to scraps of talk between him and Sarah. No man ruled his tongue before Moll, for it concerned nobody that, while her brain was not equal to connected thought, the surface of her mind might be strewn with chaotic fragments of knowledge.

But, whatever she did or did not realise of what was going on about her, one thing pierced to the very core of her understanding. Eustace was ill—dying; lying alone in the house that she could see looking over the countryside as she went her way on the roads. He was up there behind those walls, helpless; so she had been told in the shop. Every one had left him, and even the splendid lady she had met at the bridge had deserted him and gone with all the rest. Moll's eyes grew dark as she

Digitized by Google

thought of Hester, who had left him to die. She knew something of sickness, for in her clumsy way she had nursed her sister when she ailed, which was often, for Betsy was a delicate woman, unfit for the rough work that had hardened Moll's sinews and tanned her face. The two women had lived in peace and good-will, but no compunction came to the stronger as she prepared to leave her comrade. The news she had heard admitted of neither question nor delay. She tramped away down the road with not a look behind, her face lifted towards her goal; past the church, over the brook, up the fields, and disappeared beyond the fir-trees by Crishowell House. There was no one to cry after her, either in mockery or warning, for the doors were shut in the village.

But these events were some days old when Hester stood in her aunt's house in an opulent London square with Stotson's letter in her hand. The room was in disorder and millinery lay about on the sofa and chairs. Her maid was on her knees packing a little box with necessaries for her mistress's hurried departure, for the news had reached Hester as she rose, and she was to leave London by coach that afternoon.

The constraint that had grown up between herself and Eustace had not interfered with her preparations for their marriage. He had only written once to her, but he had taken their relationship for granted in his letter and she looked for the clearing of the cloud when he should have recovered from the shock of Aythan's trial. She had thought it best to keep silence for a little while, and the one letter she had despatched to him had not been

Digitized by Google

answered. This had troubled her and was beginning to trouble her more when the shaft that had travelled so surely through the country to reach her found its mark.

It was a couple of days later that she saw the Black Mountain heave up in the distance and knew that there were only a few more hours of her journey. She had come alone, for her maid had no wish to run into danger, and Hester had acquiesced, hardly knowing whether the woman was with her or not. She had no eyes, no ears for anything; she could only sit alone inside the coach, her hands clasped on her knees and her lips pressed together in a colourless line. Everything had lost its power of sensation but her heart that was dripping its life away in her breast. Tenderness had never been a great characteristic of hers, and if her love had been fierce, strong, and jealous, the softness that clothes most women who love as with a garment had been lacking in her. Now she crouched, broken and weak, under the scourge lifted over her; there was no hope in her, as there was no strife; nothing but despair and the drip, drip of the tears of blood that she could feel almost physically as they ran down. She sat as still as if she were paralysed and when they had passed Llangarth she turned her gaze, which had been set, unseeing, on the landscape as it fled by, into the emptiness of the carriage and never looked out again until the horses were pulled up at the toll-gate by the foot of Crishowell lane.

Rain had been falling for the last hour and Hester, who had not noticed it, stepped down from the coach into a network of shallow puddles; there was

Digitized by Google

no one to meet her, for there had been no time to send word of her coming. Her little box was too heavy to carry, so it was given into the toll-keeper's charge. The man looked at her curiously as he drew it in over the doorstep. It was not more than a mile to Crishowell House and she gathered up her skirts in her hands and set out.

The hedges on either side were loaded with drops, for, though the rain was half-hearted and misty, the spring leaves held small deluges which they scattered when a gust shook them. There was not much wind, but a rainy fringe hung on the mountain. She pressed forward, not meeting a soul. The far-away voice of the cuckoo came floating from the patches of wood higher up the valley, sounding unreal, an echo from a world of illusion. She reached "The Cow" and turned into the side-road leading up to Crishowell House. As she passed the elm-tree the signboard glimmered pale blue through its boughs behind the effigy of the patient white beast under the eaves. At one of the windows a face appeared for a moment, looking, as it seemed to Hester, over a barrier at her. She had a sense of being cut off from everything. She had seen life always in relationship to herself, and now something unexplained had happened to herself and all creation stood apart considering her dispassionately as this woman in the upper story of the public-house considered her from behind the pane.

She toiled up the hill in the wet. Her boots were thin and the mud oozed round her feet; but, though the unconscious instinct of a woman who has always considered her dress made her draw her skirts up round her ankles, she was beyond discomfort.

Digitized by Google

The grey veil of rain had dropped a little lower and the three fir-trees looked inky black against it as they came into sight. She reached the last bend in her way, and, as she rounded it, the house appeared before her.

The farm-gate was open, giving an interrupted view of the entrance, and a small hand-trolley was standing not far from the door. She recognised it as belonging to the carpenter in the village. There was no one near it and it was wheeled up to the wall of the great barn. As she looked a woman came out of the door, a woman with bare head and sleeves rolled back upon her long arms. A shiver went through Hester as Mad Moll took the shaft of the cart and pulled it nearer to the house. She went in again and Hester stopped short, putting up her hands and pressing her face between them; her courage sank in her like a stone. There had been no mention of Moll in Stotson's letter and the sudden sight of her added to her despair. What was she doing in Crishowell House? Hester set her teeth and went on with white cheeks.

She had not reached the open farm-gate when Moll came out again, dragging something over the threshold, a dark, long object. It was a heavy load, for she paused and straightened herself slowly, with the thing lying at her feet in the rain. To Hester, approaching, it was as if she had seen it all before; as if something she had feared in a dream had come to wreak its force on her; as if the fate she had always known of—secretly—was beside her at last.

When she had got within a few yards of the house the woman turned and saw her.

Digitized by Google

"Ah! here you be!" she called. "Come! Come an' help me!"

There was no need for Hester's lips to frame their question. The rough deal coffin darkened by the wet was its answer.

"I did bring it up on my head," said Moll. "They Crishowell folk would n't come nigh, only the doctor. He were here an' we laid him out."

Hester had sunk upon the threshold, her head turned to the wall. The coffin lay between the women. She made no reply, but a monotonous sobbing came from her throat.

Moll stood watching her. She had apparently forgotten the load at her feet.

"You was his wife," she said, "but you would n't come a-nigh him neither."

Hester looked up with her piteous eyes.

"No, no," she faltered; "never his wife, never his wife."

"You did go an' leave him," said Moll again.

There was no reply but the shuddering sounds that came from Hester.

"Come!" cried Moll loudly; "come you! Get up—get up an' help me. You can work now you be here!"

She bent over her and took her by the wrist, dragging her to her feet as a stern nurse may drag a child.

The iron grasp left her no choice, and though the woman's grip seemed to be breaking through her bone she made no resistance.

Together they lifted the load in their arms and laid it on the little cart.

Hester's strength was not great and she stag-

Digitized by Google

gered and almost fell under her share of the burden. She was tottering from the strain, but despair and terror of Moll over-mastered her weakness. Her gloves were sodden with the mud that clung to the coffin where it had rested on the ground, and her drenched clothes hampered her limbs. Moll stopped to get a moment's breath, for Eustace's roughly-made bed, put together in haste, had nothing whereby it might be lifted. There was no name on the boards and the tops of the nails with which she and the doctor, working grimly together, had closed it down, protruded unevenly. Moll took hold of one end of the cross-bar on the trolley's shaft and signed to her companion to take the other. As Hester fell back from her she seized her again and thrust her into her place and they went forward, yoked like slaves, the mad woman and the sane.

They took their way down the lane up which Hester had come. She did not pray for deliverance from her terrible yoke-fellow, for the misery of her situation so overwhelmed her that her mind would scarcely work. She did not ask where they were going. Her nerves relieved themselves at last and the tears dropped from her face as she plodded on; cold tears, running steadily. She could hardly see, and a sudden dip in the slant of the hill increasing the weight of the cart behind her brought her to her knees. She looked up at Moll and her lips moved as if in supplication. But Moll forced her to her feet again, cursing her, and they went on.

They passed "The White Cow" and turned up the road into the village lane, the woman who, a

Digitized by Google

short time ago, had waded into the water in deference to her companion compelling her now as though she were a driven sheep. The light in Moll's eyes was wilder than it had been then and her countenance more gaunt. As they came in sight of the church she went on faster, dragging with her great strength and striding so that Hester could hardly keep pace. The tormented woman felt that she must soon fall. Perhaps, this time, Moll would kill her as she lay.

As they entered the village her companion was talking to herself. They could see the churchyard gate at the top of the slight rise of ground that was doubling the load at their backs and she stumbled on, knowing that the goal of their journey was at hand. The gate stood open and Eustace's ill-matched bearers drew him in; one in her rent and draggled silk with her gold chain hanging broken about her throat, torn by Moll's rough hands, and the other in her coarse working clothes. There was a grave open not far from the path, kept ready, nowadays, to meet necessity, and towards it the women turned. Moll drew the cart close to the gaping darkness in the green turf and stood still.

A few boards were lying on the grass.

"There be no ropes," she said, looking into Hester's face with a perplexed expression.

"No," said the other mechanically.

"D'ye hear?" said Moll. "There be no ropes."

The masterfulness had gone out of her bearing like an extinguished flame out of a lamp and she looked towards Hester as though for support. Suddenly she smiled.

Digitized by Google

"I saw ye on the bridge," she said.

A fresh terror assailed her hearer as the irresponsibility of the demented creature shone out anew. It stimulated her numbed wits.

"You must get the ropes," she said, snatching at any chance that might free her.

"Surely there are some in the church—in the village—anywhere!" she cried, clasping her hands convulsively as the other stood still. "We *must* have them—we cannot do without the ropes!"

Moll hesitated for a moment, then turned and went away between the mounds, looking back at her and smiling still.

Hester stood where she left her; flight was what she had purposed, but she was too much bewildered to act. And where was she to go? Her home stood empty on the hillside, but had it been otherwise she would have quailed before the thought of retracing her way to the spot on which her martyrdom had begun. She looked round as the sound of voices drew near to see the doctor coming round the churchyard wall; Sarah Ukyn walked beside him.

At the sight of her face, round and red and familiar, the events she had forgotten in the mortal stress of the last hour pressed back on Hester; Aythan, the trial, and the futile money that had passed from herself to this woman. Sarah saw her and made as though she would speak to her over the low coping.

Then there came to Hester one shaft of blessed light, piercing the blackness of her anguish; Eustace had died without knowing the history of what she had done.

Digitized by Google

The knowledge of this mercy shown her did what the anguish of her forced journey with Moll had not been able to do, and she fainted by the cart at the side of the open grave.

The doctor hurried into the churchyard.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXX

THE TURN OF THE ROAD

Sir Helbert Bucknall had accomplished his drive to Hereford so successfully on the evening of his meeting with the doctor that he reached it soon after dark. He had thundered at Mr. Stotson's door in a way that brought the whole household into the hall, and he had sat up half the night with the family discussing his tremendous discovery.

The judge who had tried Aythan's case was still in the town, as the assize was not yet over, and, on the following evening, accompanied by the lawyer, Sir Helbert waited upon him at his lodging. On the advice of Mr. Stotson he had given the great man time to dine before he presented himself. When the two left the house together some time later their hopes were high, for the matter had been promised the deepest consideration and Prosser was to be conveyed to Hereford in a carriage which Sir Helbert was to hire for the purpose. Should his statement prove satisfactory, a copy of it was to be forwarded to the Secretary of State with a letter from the judge containing a strong recommendation of a "free pardon" for Aythan.

And now the days of waiting were over, the free pardon had come, and the old man sat at his

Digitized by Google

accustomed table in the dining-room of "The Green Dragon" with his late agent opposite to him.

Aythan had been released that day and he looked at each detail of the sober, well-known place as one looks who has returned from a long journey. He could not talk much and Sir Helbert was silent too.

He had come back to learn that a changed world would meet him outside the prison gate. Though nothing could disturb the deep happiness at his heart, his thoughts would go to the spot where Eustace lay by Crishowell church. He had never spoken to him since that morning when his old comrade stood apart with gibes on his tongue and watched him struggle alone with the Green Jiner; but he had seen him in court and knew from what was written in his face that the enmity between hem had passed away. He thanked God that it had been so, as he heard of the solitary days of his illness and his tragic burial. He turned away his head and strove to put all bitterness from him as he read the news sent by the Crishowell doctor who had carried Hester from the churchyard. He had told Sir Helbert that she would not come if she valued her life. She had come, and soon there would be no one to stand between Aythan and his inheritance. Eustace would not lie alone for long.

But no idea of gain was in his mind. His one overwhelming gain was a thing that dwarfed everything else that the world could give him. Past the grim visions of fever, death and loss, past the remembrance of the black darkness through which he had come, his manhood's inheritance awaited him, a thing greater than houses or lands. He put his

Digitized by Google

hand to his breast pocket to touch the letter that lay there for the hundredth time since he had received it on his release. Next day he would see the writer. Neither he nor Sir Helbert knew how the meeting was to be brought about, for the doors of Tillestone were closed against them both; but he was determined to get at Barbara somehow, for he was in a state of mind which made him quite ready, if need be, to break into the house. Sir Helbert's mouth twitched in its customary way as he told him this, and although he said "Nonsense, boy!" very loudly, Aythan knew that there was but one thing the old man would like better, and that would be to do it himself, if only for the pleasure of upsetting Mr. Troup. Sir Helbert had waited in the governor's room to leave the prison with him that morning, and, in spite of the feelings that he brought to their meeting, had told him as they drove, side by side, to the inn, of his plain dealing with Barbara's father. And Aythan had laughed loud and long.

Sir Helbert had managed to convey to Barbara the account of his discovery at Prosser's cottage and subsequent interview with the judge. The grounds for hope were so strong that he had felt himself justified in doing so, and when Aythan's pardon was an accomplished fact and the order for his release had come, he sent off a message to Tillestone. The tidings were known in Hereford late in the evening and he insisted that one of his own servants should start on horseback as soon as it was light next morning with the news. "When this reaches your hands," he had written, "Waring will be a free man."

Digitized by Google

And so, while he and Aythan sat dining together, Barbara was spending her hours in an ecstasy of thankfulness. She could not settle to anything, she could not look forward, she could not look back. The present was all she could think of. She did not even ask herself when she might see her lover. Her soul was so weary with suspense and suffering that she only wanted to be alone with it, to tell it again and again that all was well. To-morrow she would think and act, to-day she could only feel.

Mr. Troup was not an early riser and he always breakfasted alone, so Aythan was some miles on his way to Tillestone on the following day when Barbara went into her father's sitting-room. He looked up as she entered and for once he realised that he had a very lovely woman for a daughter. Everything was good in Barbara's sight when she woke that morning; there was a softness as of unshed tears in her hazel eyes and triumph on her lips. She had gathered a cluster of the red japonica that climbed on the house and stuck it into the fastening of her bodice. It had a rough stem which scraped her bosom like a thorn but she did not mind. She wore it because her heart, which had died in her, was alive again, and even the touch of the sharp point against her skin reminded her of it. Each time that it stabbed her it said to her: "He is free! He is free!"

Sir Helbert's letter had been delivered to her privately; and now the day's breathing-space that she had allowed herself was over and she had come to tell the news to Mr. Troup. She expected no sympathy, but she felt it incumbent on her to make

Digitized by Google

plain to him what Aythan's release would mean to herself. Clarence had never allowed her to be anything to him and she knew that the prospect of parting with her would make no awkward demands upon his feelings. Neither would these fresh developments come upon him as a shock, for she had told him of Sir Helbert's discovery on the day she had heard of it. The result could not find him unprepared. She was certain of his opposition and of disagreeables generally, but nothing had power to daunt her nor cast her down while the japonica cried its glowing triumph near her heart.

"What a beautiful shade of red," he observed, as he noticed the flower. "I have always disliked scarlet, but this is, perhaps, more crimson."

Barbara sat down near him.

"Yes; I gathered it from the wall," she said. "Father, I have come to tell you that Aythan Waring's innocence is proved. He is released. You remember that I told you of the man Prosser's story. He is free, father."

He shot a quick look at her.

"I forbade you ever to mention the subject to me again."

"But I must, sir," said she; "I have no choice."

"I will hear nothing more!" exclaimed Mr. Troup. "I have had enough trouble from this detestable affair as it is. Understand that it is nothing to me whether he is released or not."

"But it is everything to me, sir," said Barbara, "for I am going to be his wife. Oh, father! why will you not give me a little consideration? I have gone through so much."

"And who has considered me?" cried Mr. Troup.

Digitized by Google

"Who has thought of me? No one has had the slightest regard for my annoyance and discomfort. I have been dragged to Hereford on account of a matter that it wearies me to think of; I have been made almost ill by that unspeakable person, Sir Helbert Bucknall. I cannot and will not endure it. And now you come to tell me that you are going to marry a criminal!"

Barbara's breast heaved and her eyes lit as she looked straight into those of her father.

"He is not a criminal," she said in a very quiet voice. "That has been proved."

"Do not imagine I will allow him to come here," he went on. "Neither he nor Sir Helbert shall enter this place again. When I think of the possibility of such a scene as the one that took place when you returned—when I remember Sir Helbert's behaviour in this room——"

"There is no need for either to come here," said Barbara. "Sir Helbert will be my friend as long as I live, but he need not trouble you. There is no more for me to say, sir. I have said everything with as little disrespect as I can. I meant to ask for your consent as any other daughter would have done, but you have made it impossible. You do not care for me, father; you have never cared for me."

"You have made this place intolerable to me!" cried Mr. Troup, rising and walking about the room. "I hoped when I settled here to have some comfort out of life and every one has made it unbearable. I have begun to hate Tillestone; I am reminded of nothing but horrors and vexations of every kind. I have been feeling it for a very long time and I

Digitized by Google

will not stay here. I will go abroad and I will lose no time about it."

Barbara rose too.

"I shall have my things packed at once," continued Mr. Troup, shifting the small objects on his table about with nervous fingers, "and you had better do the same. I shall go to London first and start from there."

"And you will not give me your consent, father? I shall not ask again."

"I trust you will not!" he cried. "I assure you I am tempted to wish that that meddlesome yokel in Sir Helbert's cottage had held his tongue."

Barbara went up-stairs to her room; she stood in the middle of it, her red lips drawn into a line and her hands clenched at her sides. Then she took a box off her dressing table, and, unlocking it, turned it upside down. A handful of coins fell out, which she swept into a little silk bag and thrust into her bosom under the red flowers. When she had put on her outdoor clothes she went out of the house and walked away down the Hereford road. There were nearly seventeen miles between her and the town, but she was in the humour to face anything. It was not only her lover who had got his freedom; his had begun yesterday and hers should begin from this hour. She was of age and she meant to take advantage of her twenty-three years. She knew that Mrs. Stotson would keep her until Aythan could take her away.

It was not more than eleven o'clock and she told herself that, if she failed to reach Hereford by evening, she would ask some wayside cottage-woman to let her sit in her kitchen for the night.

Digitized by Google

But she hoped to fall in with a vehicle going in the same direction as herself and a driver friendly enough to give her a place in it. There were plenty of millers' and carriers' vans on the road, as a rule.

When she heard sounds of wheels or horses' feet she would stop to listen; but, unfortunately, for the first few miles she met everything and was overtaken by nothing. Such travellers on foot as she saw glanced at her with a faint curiosity. She sat down to rest on a bank when the midday sun grew strong, for she had walked fast. In front of her was a turn of the road beyond which lay a long, shadeless stretch.

How little she had guessed what was before her when she rose! She had not the smallest spark of misgiving or regret for what she had done. Not twice would she risk being separated from Aythan. Clarence Troup's last words still rung in her ears; their cruelty had cut the last strand that bound her to her life with him. She had always been an encumbrance to him and he would not miss her, for his own interests and tastes and comforts were all-sufficient. She could not help sighing as she thought of her black pony. She had not made use of him to-day because she did not wish to take anything with her on which her father had the least claim. He would be sold, she supposed, if Mr. Troup's determination to go abroad was carried out. As soon as she was married she would ask Aythan to buy him back for her. But she hardly ventured to look into that future; its happiness overcame her too much. In a short time—in a few weeks, perhaps—she, who had left him in the grim en-

Digitized by Google

croaching shadow of a violent death, would be part of his life. She covered her face with her hands and thanked God; not definitely in words, but in the ecstatic silence of her soul.

As the quick beat of hoofs came to her she rose and went forward again. She did not want to be stared at, and she thought she was less conspicuous walking than sitting by the wayside.

She reached the turn of the road just as the unseen advancing rider came round it, cantering steadily. As she looked up at him she stood still, dumb. Aythan pulled up and swung himself from the saddle.

There was no one within sight; but had the mayor and corporation of the city of Hereford come round the corner upon them, neither would have cared. The horse stood beside them, nosing the young shoots of the hedge. Barbara knew nothing but that her lover's arms held her fast and that she could feel his heart beating against her own. The red japonica was crushed to pieces; its petals were strewing the road.

* * * * * *

Aythan and Barbara stood together at an open window in Crishowell House. The warm July evening was just merging into night and a clear starlight lay over the valley below them. They had been married two days. They had waited until the fever had disappeared from Crishowell and their home could be made ready to receive them.

Mr. Troup had not gone abroad, but Sir Helbert had taken Barbara one morning to a quiet church in Hereford where Aythan and Harry Stotson were

Digitized by Google

waiting to meet them. The lawyer with his wife were the only other people who saw the short ceremony, and when that was over the little party went back to his house.

Barbara had wished to go at once to Crishowell, for there was no one to look after the place, and her desire was to see Aythan stand once more among his own people. The scourge that had swept over that part of the valley had only left a remnant of his old friends to welcome him back; but a little knot of these were assembled at "The White Cow" to accompany him to his own door, and Benny Bowen, who had hobbled as far as the inn, brought a bunch of his cherished treasures to offer to Barbara.

"He 've done well for hisself," observed another old gaffer who had been considered a judge of some things in his day. "Her be a purty piece, indeed."

And now, as Aythan and Barbara looked down, they could see, spreading like sombre plumes under the stars, the boughs of the great yew in Crishowell churchyard. Fate had caught the idle, jesting Eustace to send him down the hill with the two women who had meant so little to him and to whom he had represented so much. He was lying near the tree with Hester at his side, and the long mound that covered Mad Moll at their feet. Perhaps, at the crazy woman's next waking, the heart whose loyalty had cost her her life would beat in a world less difficult for the simple to understand.

Aythan looked down into the stillness that

Digitized by Google

wrapped those three who had gone out of his life for ever, and, for a moment, he forgot his happiness.

Then he felt Barbara's touch against his shoulder, and turning, he drew her in and shut the window.

THE END

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

3 2044 009 881 434

This book should be returned to the Library on or before the last date stamped below.

A fine of five cents a day is incurred by retaining it beyond the specified time.

Please return promptly.

DUE FEB 13 '35

WIDENER
BOOK DUE
FEB 11 1991

WIDENER
DUE
SEP 10 1991

Digitized by Google